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REST IN PEACE

Jamin Pugh
(Jay Briscoe)

JANUARY 25, 1984 – JANUARY 17, 2023

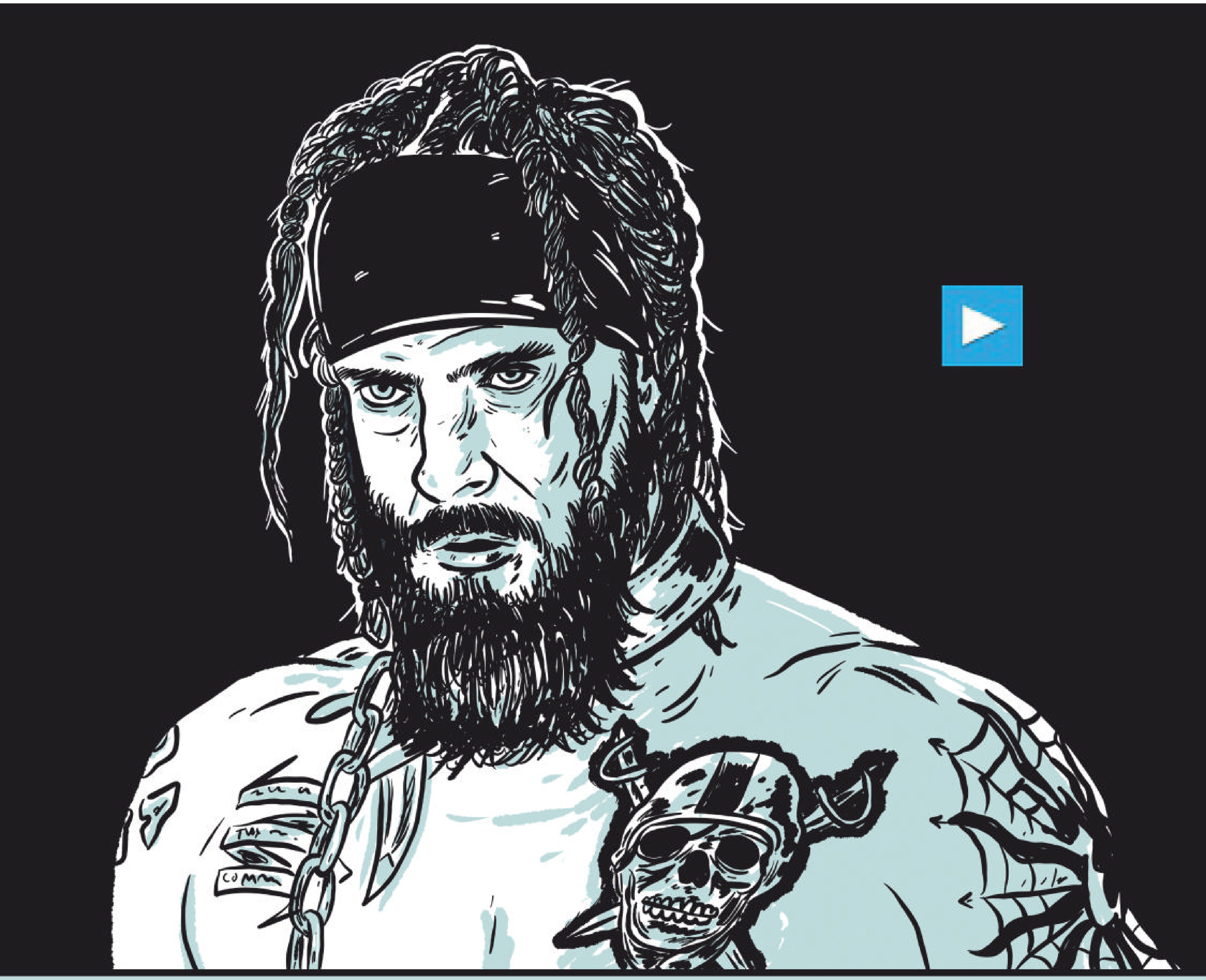

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEC HUGILL

The staff of *PWI* joins the wider professional wrestling community in sending its condolences to the loved ones of Jay Briscoe. He will be sorely missed.

from the DESK OF...

IF RECENT HISTORY has taught me nothing, it is the fragile nature of our existence and to not take the ones we love for granted. In my April 2021 column, I wrote about my wife Megan's ongoing battle with cancer. To this day, that difficult battle continues. There are ups and downs, as anyone with chronic illness will attest, and I am continually amazed by her strength and courage as she takes on this awful disease.

Mere months after I told readers about Megan's fight, my mother passed away quite suddenly due to an undiagnosed heart condition. Though she wasn't in perfect health, the abrupt loss was difficult for me, even at age 36, to process.

Grief is a terrible, though unavoidable part of life. And, despite my own experiences mentioned above, I can only imagine the degree of emotional pain and loss currently being felt by Ashley, Gannon, Gracie, and Jayleigh Pugh. Jamin Pugh, devoted husband and father—best known to wrestling fans as Jay Briscoe—was taken from them in a tragic January 17 car accident. These three young kids are left without their loving dad, as Ashley Pugh must navigate her own grief while supporting her son and two daughters through theirs.

To make matters more difficult, Gracie and Jayleigh were both in the car at the time of the accident. Each suffered serious, potentially life-altering injuries, which have thankfully begun to improve with treatment.

Of course, the grief is also being deeply felt by Mark Pugh, the other half of the Briscoe Brothers tag team. On-screen and off, Jay and Mark were close as can be. Jay's passing took place one day before Mark's 38th birthday (Jay was 38, too).

So much can, has been, and will be written about Jay and Mark's accomplishments in the ring. Together, the duo were cornerstones of Ring of Honor during its original 20-year run, and they recently ascended once again to the top of its celebrated tag division. Along the way, they brought tag team wrestling into the 21st century and influenced the style we see used today in WWE and AEW, among scores of other promotions.

Behind the scenes, the Briscoes developed a reputation for kindness and generosity that rivaled their notoriety as in-ring performers. This was equally true away from the business altogether. As Harry Burkett discusses in this month's "Ringside," the Pugh Family are pillars of their community in Laurel, Delaware. Locally, the loss was more than just that of a single clan—the sorrow echoed throughout the area.

In the hours and days that followed Jay's passing, news spread as the seemingly endless list of peers and friends touched by him (and Mark) grew, and many more memories were shared. What began as a terribly sad news story in Southern Delaware and shook the wrestling world was soon being reported on CNN and by the BBC. Such was the profound imprint of the Ring of Honor star.

Jay Briscoe may be gone, but his influence lives on, both in his community and throughout the industry. The countless folks whose lives he touched will stand as testament to his hard work and character.

For more about the Briscoes' in-ring achievements and impact on the sport of professional wrestling, I highly recommend reading Righteous Reg's column in this issue (page 64). Beyond that, I would like to once again express my dearest sympathies for the many individuals who were close with Jay. If you are among them, may you find peace in the present and comfort in the cherished memories of your time together.

To everyone else: Be well and be happy this year. Take care of yourselves … and thank you for reading.

Kevin McElvaney
Editor-in-Chief

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PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED (ISSN: 1043-7576), Vol. 44, No. 4, 2023 is published nine times annually by Kappa Publishing Group LLC., 6198 Butler Pike, Suite 200, Blue Bell, PA 19422. Periodicals postage paid at Blue Bell, PA 19422, and additional post offices. Postmaster: Send change of address notices to: Pro Wrestling Illustrated, PO Box 37059, Boone, IA 50037-0059. Single copy price $7.99 U.S./Canada (£6.99 in U.K.). Annual subscription price $71.91 in the U.S., $88.56 in Canada and Mexico, and $130.41 in other countries.

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Printed in U.S.A.

WWC Universal champ Intelecto 5 Estrellas sizes up Dirty Dango (WWE's Fandango) in front of a grateful crowd at Bayamon, Puerto Rico's Coliseo Ruben Rodriguez. Find match results for this show and many other events in "Arena Reports," starting on page 72.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY PINEIRO DELGADO

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In a Wrestle Kingdom event full of headlines, the non-wrestling debut of the former **Sasha Banks** has put New Japan Pro-Wrestling in a whole new spotlight. This section details WK 17 with exclusive photos, plus bonus coverage of big events from Stardom and Pro Wrestling NOAH.

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54 GO FIGURE!

Wrestling toys and action figures are having a moment right now, and it's largely due to the purchasing power of grown-up fans. **Nick Perkins** speaks with star wrestlers/collectors **Matt Cardona** and **Ethan Page** to explore what's behind the trend.

58 VIKINGO IN THE U.S.A.

After ranking #8 in the 2022 *PWI* "500," AAA champ **Hijo Del Vikingo** has finally made his debut on U.S. soil. We share photos from two of his recent matches.

STAY CONNECTED!

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Back Issues: Every *PWI* cover since 1979 can be viewed at our website. Back issue availability is noted

REACHING YOU …
Pro Wrestling Illustrated—June 2023; Digital edition on sale March 30; print edition on sale April 18

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Independent news e-mail: pwiresults@yahoo.com
Subscription Inquiries: Kappa Publishing Group LLC, PO Box 37059, Boone, IA 50037-0059
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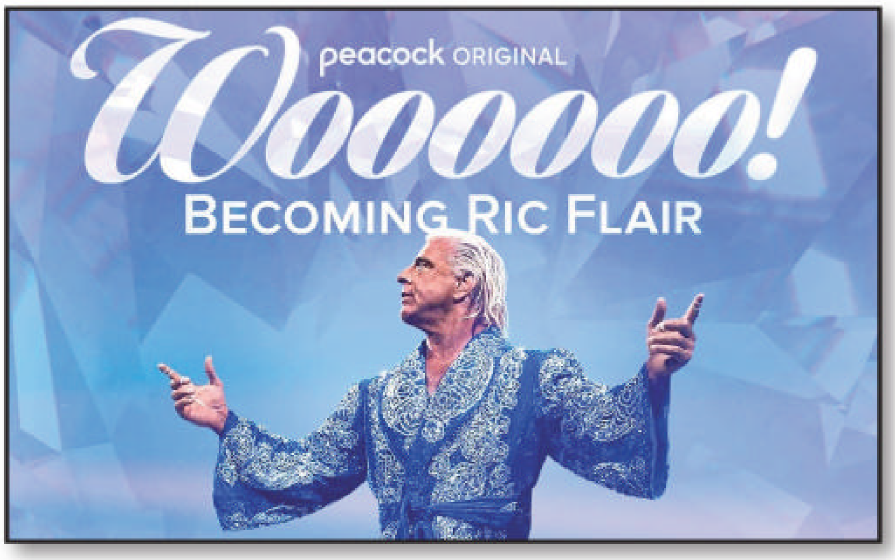
BEFORE the BELL

COMPILED BY MIKE BESSLER

MEDIA REVIEWS

WOOOOOO! BECOMING RIC FLAIR



The process of public rehabilitation was, at one time, an arduous journey that could easily span many years. Richard Nixon authored some books and helped out his successors behind the scenes to evolve from a disgraced ex-president into an "elder statesman." In the former Soviet Union, people regained their reputations and livelihoods through acts of government, sometimes posthumously. As for Ric Flair, who is coming off an unflattering few years in the limelight, he's likely banking that *Woooooo! Becoming Ric Flair* may turn the tide of public opinion.

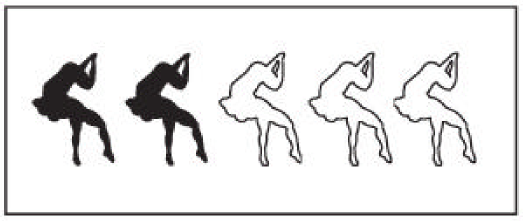
A Peacock original documentary, *Woooooo!* Is carefully cultivated and well-produced, presenting the pivotal moments of Flair's career. Fox Sports reporter Tom Rinaldi serves as both interviewer and narrator, his tone and delivery reminiscent of the ominous voiceovers from VH1's old *Behind the Music* series. Indeed, *Woooooo*! seems to aspire to be in the same vein of *Behind the Music* and its ilk, in that efforts are made to weave together a credible and compelling narrative of fact and emotion. But there's not much here that hasn't already been covered through previous productions, including *The Ultimate Ric Flair Collection* (2003), *Ric Flair & the Four Horsemen* (2007), and *Nature Boy Ric Flair: The Definitive Collection* (2008). Flair's 2004 autobiography, *To Be the Man*, was itself an exceptional chronicle of his life at the time of its publication, and many of the salient points of that work are reiterated in this Peacock venture.

Granted, attention is also provided to Flair's life since his emotional WWE Hall of Fame induction and ostensibly "final" match at WrestleMania 24, including personal struggles and family tragedies. There's an odd juxtaposition, though. In the midst of a tale that includes both inferences and evidence of emotional pain, regret, and misfortune, the sentiments expressed by the likes of Post Malone, Hulk Hogan, and Mike Tyson virtually glorify Flair's excesses and propensity to self-harm.

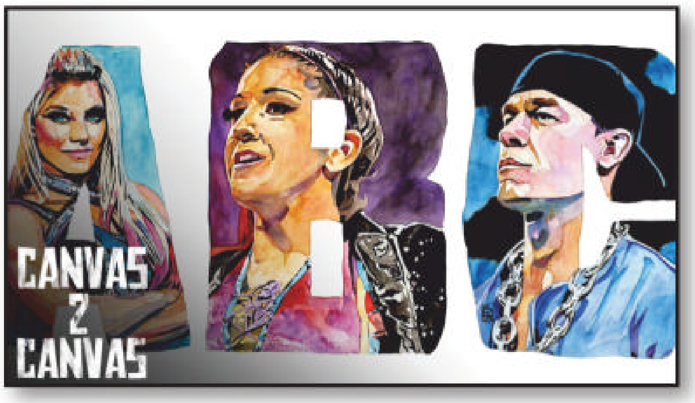
It is particularly unsettling to see Flair himself revel in his own self-destruction, making light of concepts like treatment, abstinence, and recovery and seeming to thumb his nose at those who tried to help him during his darkest hours.

Since 2008, wrestling fans have lamented that Flair's missteps—including his bloody Australia escapade with Hulk Hogan, his TNA shenanigans, and ultimately passing out twice in his most recent "last match" in 2022—have diminished his legacy. If true, *Woooooo!* doesn't do much to rectify that. Slick with gloss and full of spin, it's less than essential viewing. Maybe they should've left those memories alone, after all.

We give it two out of five suplexes.



WWE CANVAS 2 CANVAS



It's all good and well to marvel at the work of artist Rob Schamberger. After all, his unique interplay of color and shadow has distinguished him as a veritable Delacroix of professional wrestling. If you've ever wondered how he gets from point A to point Z, you're in luck, as he tells all on WWE's official YouTube channel in a series entitled *Canvas 2 Canvas*. From classic personalities like Mr. Perfect to current favorites like Damage CTRL, Schamberger puts his skill and technique on display, taking viewers step by step through his process with pleasant, down-to-earth play-by-play. If you're into binge-watching, there's 450+ episodes already on YouTube. It's a great way to celebrate fandom and get your own creative juices flowing in the process. **10/10 happy little trees.**

TALKIN' TRASH

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related items you've been talking about lately and our gut reaction to each:

10. Rumors fly regarding an imminent sale of WWE.

WWE execs became suspicious when Vince asked if anyone remembered his Craigslist password.

9. Santino Marella becomes IMPACT Wrestling's new "Director of Authority."

Marella's cobra puppet landed a gig as the head of IMPACT's Ventriloquism and Marionette Division.

8. Mercedes Mone debuts at Wrestle Kingdom 17.

The former Ms. Banks reportedly selected her new name as a tribute to Impressionist painter Claude Monet, who famously had an affinity for luxury sedans.

7. Uncle Howdy appears, in the flesh, on Smackdown.

The cameo was brief, as he had double-parked his hearse across the street.

6. Frankie Kazarian signs a long-term contract with IMPACT Wrestling.

After signing, Kazarian was shocked to learn Anthem reserved the right to pay half of his salary in the form of magic beans.

5. Stephanie McMahon resigns from her position as co-CEO of WWE.

The hard-working, business-savvy exec will spend her downtime producing a series of financial planning and spot-welding videos for YouTube.

4. Actor Vince Vaughn is spotted hanging out with Adam Cole and Dr. Britt Baker.

The actor was researching a forthcoming off-Broadway show called *Backbreakers & Bitewings: The Isaac Yankem Story.*

3. Dominik Mysterio spends a night in jail after a run-in with his dad.

He gained valuable experience, should Peacock ever get the rights for a reboot of *Orange Is the New Black*.

2. AJ Styles is out of action with a broken ankle.

Asked if fans can expect to see him back in the ring someday, Styles replied, "Is the Earth round?"

1. Roman Reigns accuses Sami Zayn of trying to usurp his spot as "Head Of The Table."

As a sign the pressure is getting to him, Reigns leveled the same claim at Solo Sikoa, the Trix rabbit, and a half-empty bottle of spray tan.

NJPW WORLD
JRA
BUSHIROAD
YOSHINOYA
SAPPORO
MICARD

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

CENTER RING

... WITH CANDACE CORDELIA

PHOTO BY ROLAND LUGO

WITH *PWI* SINCE: 2021

FIRST *PWI* ASSIGNMENT: Feature article on Jade Cargill

WHAT I DO: I am a print contributor with *PWI*, columnist ("About Face"), on-camera host of "FaceTurn with Candace Cordelia" on *PWI's* YouTube channel, and, as recently dubbed by AEW's Thunder Rosa, "*PWI's* Customer Service Rep" for Busted Open Radio.

FAVORITE WRESTLING MATCH EVER: Ever? I don't think I will have the true answer to that until about 40 or 50 years from now! But one of my favorite wrestling matches to date is Sasha Banks (Mercedes Mone) vs. Charlotte Flair on *Raw* in a Falls Count Anywhere match in 2016. A bona fide classic.

HOBBIES AND INTERESTS OUTSIDE OF WRESTLING: Traveling, going to concerts, visiting museums, baking, attempting to learn Japanese and French, journaling, and A24 & Blumhouse films.

THE LAST GOOD BOOK I READ: Based on everything I know about the book and interviews she's done so far to promote it, I have no doubt it's going to be *I'm Glad My Mom Died* by Jennette McCurdy, by the time this is published.

MY FAVORITE KIND OF MOVIE: Horror (especially psychological and social commentary horror) and comedy! *Repulsion*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Friday After Next*, *Step Brothers*, *Mean Girls*, *Eraserhead*, and *Get Out* are some of my favorite movies.

WHAT I REALLY WANT *PWI* READERS TO KNOW ABOUT ME: When I first embarked on my journey in the wrestling business, I was laser-focused on having a career like Renee Paquette's. I started working as a backstage interviewer within the independent wrestling circuit and have never stopped learning since then.

ONE TO WATCH: MICHELLE GREEN

For most people, living the jet-set life is the dream of dreams. But Michelle Green dreams bigger than other folks, with the possible exception of anyone who ever appeared with Robin Leach on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.* Hailing from Switzerland, the globetrotting Green has already made her mark in the world of international business. Now, she has her eyes set on becoming pro wrestling's next gold standard.

The daughter of a diplomat, Green moved frequently, living in Germany, Switzerland, Indonesia, Spain, and Zimbabwe. Initially learning about wrestling from television, she was intrigued when Swiss superstar Claudio Castagnoli won WWE's United States championship. A friend who noticed her growing affinity for wrestling pushed her to pursue her interest in the sport.

"I was about to move to Zurich, where there is a wrestling school, War Academy Rorbas," recalled Green. "My bestie had prepared a type of party favor that had prophecies for everyone, and mine said 'Next year, you're gonna go to your first wrestling training.' She strongly encouraged me to go. March 2019 is when I started training, and I fell head over heels for wrestling."

In addition to her time at WAR, Green also trained in Germany at wXw, in Mexico City under Skayde, and at Jazz and Rodney Mack's Dogg Pound Pro Wrestling Dojo in San Antonio, Texas. She also honed her skills at JP Wrestling Academy in Tennessee and continues to gain valuable insight from the guidance of wXw's Robert Dreissker and The Rotation.

Considering her broad range of instructors and mentors, it's unsurprising that Michelle Green draws upon a uniquely diversified reserve of techniques. "I pick my offense based on strategy and attacking a body part so that I can win as fast as possible," she explained. "My offense is chosen to win … and to work against an opponent of any size and experience level."

Green works her competitors on the mat, employing an arsenal of strikes and holds that softens them up for a high-impact finisher, such as the fisherman's neck breaker that she has dubbed her "Return On Investment." She also takes out adversaries with a rolling cutter that she refers to as "Payday."

A proud polyglot, Michelle can roast her opponents on the mic in five languages: Swiss German, German, English, Spanish, and French. "I cut promos at all my shows, dissing opponents and serenading fans," said the enterprising grappler. "In wrestling, I love characters, entertainment, stories, and being a great storyteller is the key to that. The people I'm drawn to are all great on the mic: Charlotte Flair, The Miz, MJF, Becky Lynch, Seth Rollins, and Jay White, to name a few."

Michelle Green debuted on OVW TV in early-2022 and competed on the Ohio Valley Wrestling Summer Tour. She also raised her visibility on wXw's Femmes Fatales show and at the promotion's World Tag Festival. In the process, she's become a contender to women's championships in Germany and throughout Europe. In October 2022, Green won title gold in Jazzy Gabert's SIRIUS promotion, defeating Candy Power to capture the top strap.

A fierce individual focused on being the best, Green remains mindful of what's best for business. "When wrestling is the biggest it can be, everyone profits," she stated. "I enjoy doing media and sharing my story, hoping to make wrestling bigger and to build my platform within it. To me, every day is payday."

PHOTO BY BARIS AYDIN

PRO WRESTLING GOES PRIME TIME

Sure, an entire network dedicated to a wrestling company is a novel concept, but what if pro wrestling took over every show and every channel? Here's how the listings might look if the showstoppers and high-flyers got control of the airwaves.

7:00 TO 7:30 PM | WHEEL OF DANHAUSEN

Contestants spin a circular Ouija board to solve creepy crossword puzzles.

7:30 TO 8:00 PM | "HOLLYWOOD" HOGAN SQUARES

Two contestants compete in a game of tic-tac-toe in which Brutus Beefcake occupies every square.

8:00 TO 8:30 PM | SHE'S SO POLLO

Pollo Del Mar gives up her work as a ringside manager to serve as the headmistress of a girls' finishing school, and hilarious consequences ensue.

8:30 TO 9:00 PM | EFFY'S PLACE

EFFY manages a group of snarky waitresses at a roadside cafe, and hilarious consequences ensue. (Co-starring Joey Janela as Chef Joel.)

9:00 TO 10:00 PM | CSI: AEW

Crack investigators "Hangman" Adam Page, Shawn Spears, and Sonny Kiss join forces to determine what in the world is CM Punk's problem.

10:00 TO 11:00 PM | FBI: WWE

Hurt Business detectives Cedric Alexander, Bobby Lashley, and Shelton Benjamin team up to investigate what in the world happened to NXT.

11:00 TO 11:30 PM | LOCAL NEWS AND WEATHER

Seth Rollins and Becky Lynch deliver news of the day, with Michael Cole at the sports desk and Pat McAfee on unintelligible nonsense.

11:30 PM TO 1:00 AM | FATU-RDAY NIGHT LIVE

The legendary Fatu wrestling family performs original sketch comedy. Musical guest: Rick Boogs.

1:00 AM | SIGN OFF

The Iron Sheik sings "The Star-Spangled Banner," and hilarious consequences ensue.

WE HEARD THAT!

"I went to a meet-and-greet to see [Bryan Danielson], my favorite wrestler of all-time. 'Hey, I'm a huge fan.' I was 14, I think. 'I want to wrestle.' He said, 'Just go for it. Just do it. The hardest part of doing something is to start it.' I was like, 'Alright, I'm going to do it.'"

– **VINNY PACIFICO** to Jeremy Lambert and Stephen Jensen of *The Spotlight* on his path to pro wrestling

"I think we'd all be better off as a society if everyone was salt of the earth like me."

– **MJF**, just being MJF, on Twitter

"I'm afraid of things... I'm nervous about things. But I can force myself to do things that make me uncomfortable, because I know I'm not gonna get anywhere if I don't. I may cringe after the fact, but I'm not going to let that fear hold me back."

– **DAVE BAUTISTA** on his future as an actor, from an interview with *GQ*

"I think we kind of all have the same mentality, like whatever happens outside of the company is going to happen. We really have no idea what's transpiring, but our role remains the same. It's just go out there and put on great matches."

– **KOFI KINGSTON**, commenting on the future of WWE to *SHAK Wrestling*

RINGSIDE

WITH HARRY BURKETT

JAY BRISCOE, amid his 13th Ring of Honor tag team title reign with brother **Mark Briscoe**, died in a horrendous auto accident on January 17. Jay was driving in his 2019 Chevrolet Silverado with his two daughters, **Gracie Pugh** and **Jayleigh Pugh**, when another truck swerved into his lane and hit his vehicle head-on. Jayleigh incurred injuries, but was stable as of press time, while Gracie suffered very serious back and leg injuries.

The tragic irony is that Briscoe, who had traveled hundreds of thousands of miles to wrestling venues over the past two decades, would be involved in a fatal car crash in his small hometown of Laurel, Delaware, with his family in the vehicle. Briscoe and the driver of the other truck were pronounced dead on the scene.

"We need prayers!" posted Briscoe's wife, **Ashley Pugh**, on Facebook. "Gracie is on her way into surgery on her back. Jamin would want the whole world praying for his little girl. We believe in the power of prayer!"

The Pughs are among the most respected families in the Laurel community. Jay had been a star linebacker for the Laurel High School Bulldogs, and, more recently, he was an assistant coach for his son's football team at Laurel Middle School. He also coached youth basketball. The Laurel School District, where Jay's mother serves on the school board, was closed on January 18 in his memory.

The small town's grief became big news around the entire world. The outpouring began as soon as AEW President **Tony Khan** announced the tragedy on Twitter. Among the tweets:

Cash Wheeler: "I've been in tears since I heard the news. I just don't have the words. Rest in peace, Jay."

Seth Rollins: "Being in the ring with Jay Briscoe got me my first ROH contract … Without him, I don't know if **Tyler Black** could have ever been Seth Rollins. After I signed with WWE, Jay would come to the Salisbury [Maryland] house shows to drink beer and to hoot and holler. He loved the business and he was a great human and friend. He had a twinkle in his eye and hug waiting for me no matter how long we went without seeing each other."

Paul "Triple H" Levesque: "An incredible performer who created a deep connection to fans across the globe. My condolences to the family and friends of Jay Briscoe."

I have rarely seen such an outpouring of emotion following a wrestler's death. Jay's good nature and professionalism weren't merely his reputation, but qualities that an incredible number of his peers experienced first-hand over the past 20 years. When not only friends and opponents are expressing heartfelt wishes, but lead executives of rival companies are sending condolences,

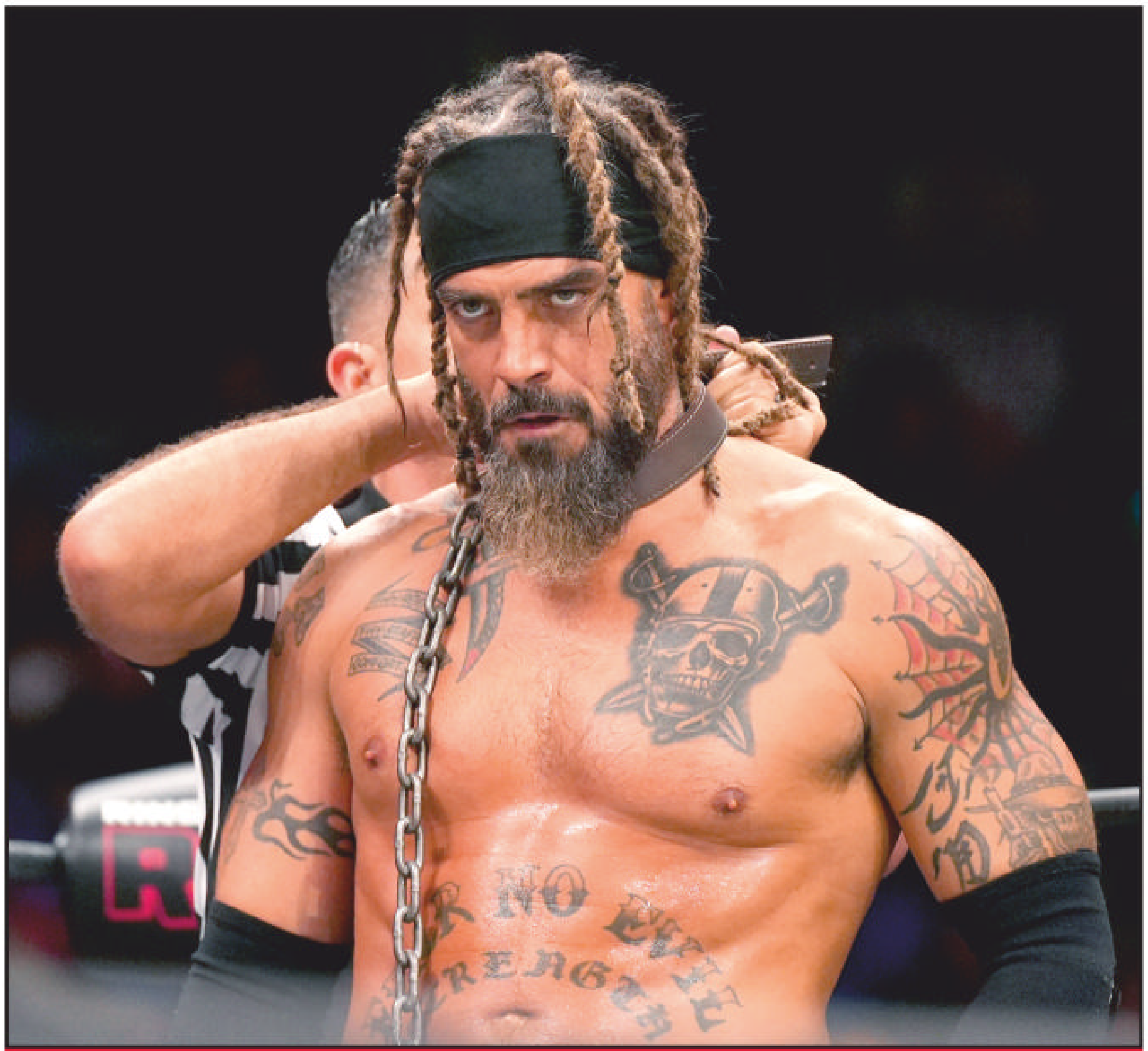


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/ROH

Jay Briscoe readies himself for the double-dog-collar match with FTR at Final Battle. After Briscoe's tragic passing on January 17, a collective grief was felt from his hometown in Delaware to friends and fans all across the globe. Mean as he was in the ring, Jay was loved for his kindness outside of it.

Vince McMahon holds aloft a football, which he would use as a weapon against Pat McAfee, at WrestleMania 38. Mere months after announcing his supposed retirement, McMahon is now back as chairman of WWE's board of directors, which closely coincided with the departure of several other key figures, including his daughter Stephanie.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

that's a very strong statement about the man and his career.

And it was an incredible career. He and Mark became legends through their 12 previous ROH tag title reigns and by traversing the globe, collecting the IWGP, GHC junior heavyweight, and IMPACT tag team championships—along with countless indie titles—as well as the 2022 Crockett Cup. The Briscoes' bloody dog collar match with **FTR** was a favorite of many *PWI* readers.

Jay also tasted singles success, with a brief ROH World title run in 2013 and a dominant reign in 2014-15. The latter run was so impressive, in fact, that Briscoe was ranked number seven in the 2015 *PWI* "500."

We send our condolences to the Pugh family and wish Jay's two daughters the best in their recovery.

The breaking news of Briscoe's death hit a pause button on all the rumors and speculation regarding a potential sale of WWE by mid-2023. **Vince McMahon**, still the most powerful shareholder in WWE, replaced daughter **Stephanie McMahon** as chairman of the board with the intent of either selling WWE or helping to negotiate the company's vital TV-rights contracts with NBC Universal and Fox.

Talk about a hostile takeover: McMahon elected himself chairman through a written consent order, and he also appointed former WWE Co-Presidents **Michelle Wilson** and **George Barrios**—instrumental in WWE's phenomenal success before the arrival of **Nick Khan**—to the board. He subsequently ousted three board members, one of whom led last year's investigation into his multi-million-dollar hush-money payments to several women over the past two decades. Two more board members resigned the following morning.

A WWE investor has filed a lawsuit claiming McMahon "pushed aside the board to illegally install himself as chairman." We'll see if there is merit to that claim in the coming months.

According to *The Wrestling Observer*, Stephanie and Triple H aren't necessarily opposed to a sale. They may view a sale as a necessary path to Vince leaving the company once and for all.

Not only did Stephanie resign as chairman, but also as Co-Chief Executive Officer with Khan, who is now the sole CEO. Some people were thrilled by Vince's return, namely Wall Street investors, reflected by a 20-percent increase in WWE's stock value.

Potential buyers of WWE include Comcast, Disney, Amazon, and Apple. Rumors of a sale to Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), the nation's sovereign wealth fund, nearly sent pundits and WWE employees into panic, but those rumors have subsided … for now.

Stephanie McMahon's insistence that she wanted time away from WWE, implying that her resignation wasn't solely the result of corporate turmoil, was accurate. Stephanie underwent surgery to repair an injured ankle at Andrews Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Center in Birmingham, Alabama. She even tweeted out a picture and thanked her "amazing caregiver, Triple H."

Kazuchika Okada's win over **Jay White** for his second IWGP World championship (his seventh IWGP title overall) at Wrestle Kingdom 17 headlined several fantastic events in Japan throughout December and January. Just as WrestleMania season has inspired many top-rate events by other promotions in March and April in the U.S., a "Wrestle Kingdom season" is apparent in the Land of the Rising Sun.

Okada had lost the World title to White at Dominion last June, but he secured a WK 17 title opportunity by winning the G1 Climax for the second consecutive year.

The other major headline from Wrestle Kingdom was the special appearance of the former Sasha Banks, now known as **Mercedes Mone**. Calling herself "The CEO" instead of the "Legit Boss," Mone faced down **KAIRI** after the IWGP

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

After her victory over Tam Nakano at Wrestle Kingdom 17, KAIRI shows off the coveted IWGP Women's title belt. Her second announced challenger, Mercedes Mone, had made her first New Japan appearance moments earlier.

Women's champ had just defeated **Tam Nakano**. Mone laid out KAIRI with a modified DDT and then raised the Women's belt over her head.

As of press time, KAIRI was scheduled to defend the title against Mone on February 18 at NJPW's Battle in the Valley in San Jose.

Kenny Omega, Okada's old rival, made a triumphant return to Wrestle Kingdom by defeating **Will Ospreay** for the U.S. title. Both the Okada-White and Omega-Ospreay bouts went in excess of 30 minutes, pleasing NJPW fans with the marathon contests they've come to expect.

Zack Sabre Jr. became the inaugural NJPW TV champion after defeating **Ren Narita** by submission in a tournament final. The championship was created to mark New Japan's 50th anniversary, and all title defenses—with 15-minute time limits—will be shown on the New Japan World streaming service.

Other crowning achievements at Wrestle Kingdom: **Hiromu Takahashi** defeated **Master Wato**, **El Desperado**, and defending champ **Taiji Ishimori** in a four-way for the junior heavyweight championship … **Tama Tonga** beat **Karl Anderson** for the NEVER openweight title (maybe **Michael Cole** will mention that!) … **Hirooki Goto & Yoshi-Hashi** defeated FTR for the heavyweight tag team belts.

World Wonder Ring Stardom hosted 14 consequential events between December 3 and January 15 alone, and the promotion's itinerary is ongoing! The first was a televised event, the Goddesses of Stardom Tag League, patterned after New Japan's World Tag League. **Nanae Takahashi** & **Yuu** defeated the Queen's Quest tandem of **Utami Hayashishita** & **Saya Kamitani** in the final.

The next phase was Stardom's Year-End tour that hit wrestling capitals such as Osaka, Hamamatsu, Takasaki, and Kanuma before reaching Tokyo's Korakuen Hall for Stardom Year-End Climax 2022. Headlining a show consisting solely of three-way singles and tag team matches, **Donna Del Mondo** bested rival faction **God's Eye** in the 10-person tag team elimination main event.

Three title changes occurred at Stardom Dream Queendom 2022, also in Tokyo: **Giulia** defeated **Syuri** in a 30-minute epic to become the new World of Stardom champion; Takahashi & Yuu defeated **meltear (Natsupoi & Tam Nakano)** for the Goddesses of Stardom championship; and **Prominence's Hiragi Kurumi**, **Risa Sera**, & **Suzu Suzuki** beat **Oedo Tai's Saki Kashima**, **Momo Watanabe**, & **Starlight Kid** in a hardcore war for the Artist of Stardom title.

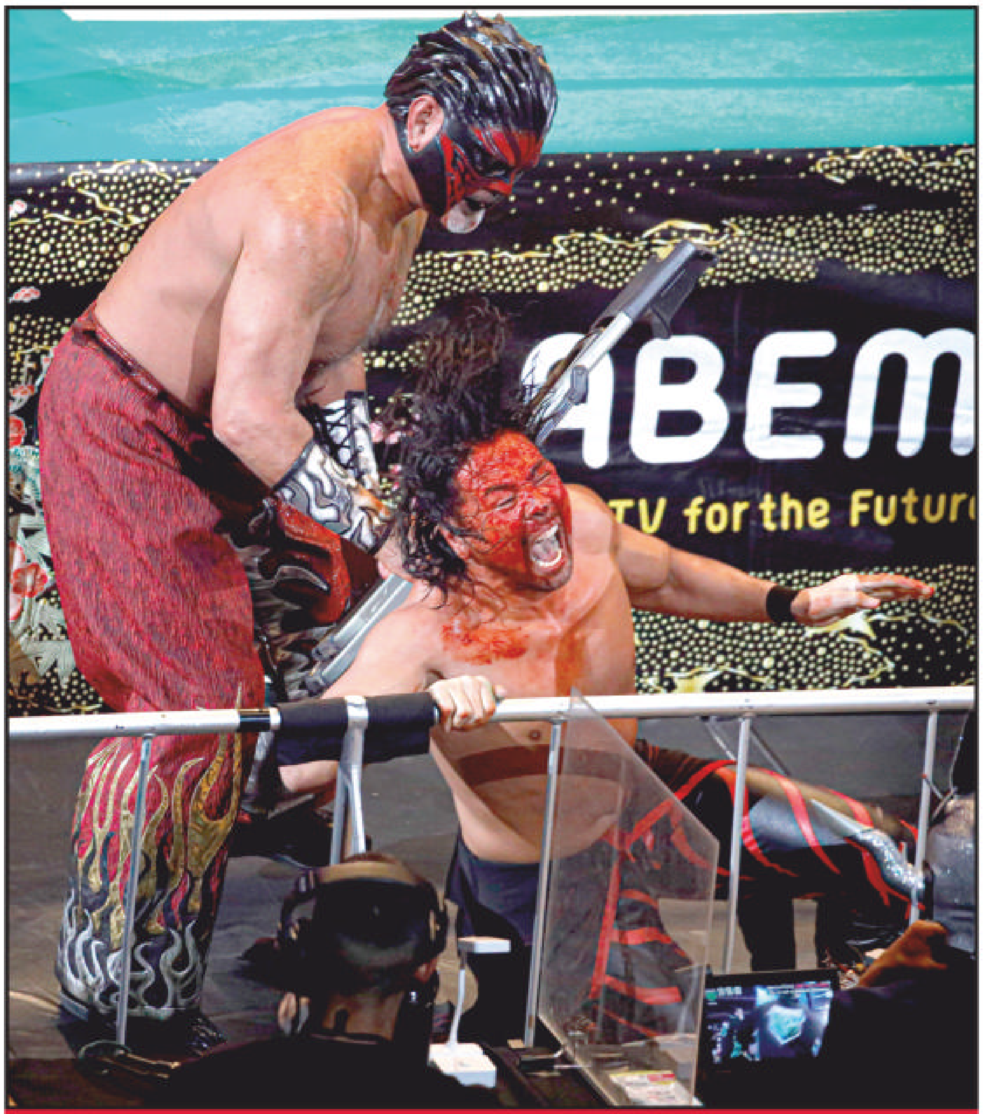
Wait! There's more: Stardom's first-ever Triangle Derby kicked off at the start of the New Year, and this trios tournament will run through March 4.

Pro Wrestling NOAH ran its special New Year's Day event at Nippon Budokan in Tokyo. In a match for the ages, **Shinsuke Nakamura** returned to defeat **The Great Muta**, who would also appear at WK 17, as part of Muta's retirement tour. Also of note, GHC champion **Kaito Kiyomiya** defeated **Kenoh**, and the team of **Yoshinari Ogawa** & **Eita** ended the brief junior heavyweight tag title reign of **Kzy** & **Yo-Hey**.

Hope you have enjoyed this Japanese tour, brought to you by *PWI*! (For more from these shows, check out our cover story, beginning on page 24.)

This 'n' that: **"Hangman" Adam Page** recuperated from a

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE



The Great Muta brawls at ringside with a Red Mist-covered Shinsuke Nakamura at NOAH's The New Year 2023. Nakamura had received special permission from WWE to compete in the match, which was a highlight of Muta's 2023 farewell tour.

scary concussion, returned to a hero's welcome on *AEW Dynamite*, scoring a big win over **Jon Moxley** … TBS champion **Jade Cargill** became the longest-reigning champion in AEW history on January 15, eclipsing **Hikaru Shida's** 372-day reign as World Women's champ … FTR has taken a step back from AEW, with their contracts set to expire in the spring … ROH's Supercard of Honor will take place March 31 at the University of Southern California's Galen Center in Los Angeles, just before WrestleMania 39 in the same city … WWE is portraying **Dragon Lee's** arrival as a big-time signing, while Dragon Lee and brother **Dralistico** have vacated four lucha libre championships, including the AAA World tag team title, as a result … **Jinny**, NXT U.K.'s charismatic fashionista, announced her retirement … **AJ Styles** suffered a broken ankle at a house show and will miss extended time … **Mickie James** kept her career alive at Hard to Kill by defeating **Jordynne Grace** in their much-anticipated showdown. James had vowed to retire if she didn't win the Knockouts World title.

Before we part, I'd like to acknowledge **Don West**, who died of brain lymphoma on December 30 at age 59. The "Billy Mays Of Pro Wrestling," West was a famed Shop at Home TV host before his long run as TNA's excitable merchandising pitchman, with stints as a manager and commentator. **Michael Cole** even noted his death on *Smackdown*.

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me. ☐

NEWS ANALYSIS

ONE OF US

I live near Laurel, Delaware, and have interviewed Jay and Mark Briscoe at their old high school, talked with them at the local Walmart, and, like Seth Rollins, I was there to see The Briscoes hoot and holler as fans at WWE shows. I saw Jay at a Laurel burger hangout, the Smash 'n' Dash, a couple of summers ago. Limbs were piled in the back of his truck, and I asked, "Why not retire from the farm?" He replied, "In case wrestling doesn't work out," with a wink.

THE REAL BLOODLINE

The McMahon family saga is every bit as compelling as the Bloodline storyline that's already captivating WWE. The stories are very similar. Vince McMahon has seized control as chairman of the board, not much different than being head of the table. Stephanie's already gone from WWE. Who will be first to go from The Bloodline? Sami Zayn? Solo Sikoa? Then there's the "Wise Man," Paul Heyman. Or is that Nick Khan?

OKADA RETURNS TO DOMINANCE

When Kazuchika Okada won the G1 Climax for the fourth time last year, earning his IWGP World title shot at Wrestle Kingdom 17, it seemed inevitable that Okada would defeat Jay White at that event. Now, a refreshed Kenny Omega is back on the scene as U.S. champion. A renewal of their rivalry also seems inevitable. Could this be the main event of Wrestle Kingdom 18? Perhaps Tony Khan could play matchmaker in AEW.

THE HANGMAN RETURNETH

The tremendous ovation that "Hangman" Adam Page received on *Dynamite* confirmed that he is the future of the company—and that his brief World title reign in 2022 was simply a precursor of what's to come. I think the fact his concussion occurred on TV tightened his bond with the fans. Also notable was Jon Moxley's first TV singles loss in nearly two years … and that he wasn't harmed in the least by it. That's a testament to the talent of both men.

QUICK COUNT

BY AL CASTLE

LAST YEAR, TWO of the biggest events on the pop culture calendar—the Academy Awards and WrestleMania—were separated by just one week. And you'd be forgiven for confusing which was which.

Looking to promote their movie, the cast of *Jackass Forever* appeared not in Hollywood's Dolby Theatre, but in a match involving Sami Zayn. And the most talked about cheap shot of the year was dealt not by Kevin Owens or Roman Reigns, but by Oscar winner Will Smith. Go figure.

As unpredictable as awards season may be, there's one thing you can count on each year: my Oscar-themed edition of "Quick Count." The envelope, please …

THE WHALE

Like Ahab hunting Moby Dick, WWE matchmakers have long had their eyes locked on the biggest, most elusive prize in all of wrestling: one more WrestleMania match featuring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

But for his impromptu, three-second squash of Erick Rowan at WrestleMania 32, it's been 10 years since "The Great One" competed in an actual wrestling match—last headlining WrestleMania 29 in a losing effort against John Cena. Every year, fans get excited over the prospect of The Rock coming out of retirement. And, every year, they've been disappointed when he hasn't.

To be sure, WWE has made overtures to Johnson, and, reportedly, nearly landed their white whale on a couple of occasions. Alas, the stars have simply not aligned to lure the Hollywood A-lister away from the silver screen and back into a wrestling ring.

Is this the year all that changes? As of this writing, there was still no word on whether Johnson had agreed to return to WWE to face his cousin, Roman Reigns, in what could be the biggest WrestleMania match in a generation.

I think the time may be right.

I know, I know, Dwayne … It doesn't matter what I think.

THE WAY OF WATER

While Triple H gazes through his spyglass in search of The Rock, he might encounter another seaworthy superstar: Chris Jericho.

After being postponed for a full year because of COVID-19 concerns, Jericho's fourth Rock

Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson takes time from his busy schedule to help Becky Lynch layeth the smacketh down on Baron Corbin in October 2019. Will Rocky clear his calendar again this April for a match with his cousin Roman Reigns?

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Daniel Garcia reluctantly hands over the ROH Pure title belt to Wheeler YUTA following a tough defeat at Final Battle. Al Castle took in this scene on his MacBook, while using other devices to catch NXT's Deadline and a UFC event (all of which aired December 10).

FIN
OF TEXAS
OF HONOR
RIN

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/ROH

'n' Wrestling Rager at Sea was scheduled to take place this February, sailing out of Miami, Florida, en route to the Bahamas. Promoters promised four days of "insane wrestling matches, musical performances, and much more."

Since 2018, the Jericho Cruise has delivered several memorable wrestling moments at sea—including in 2020, when AEW taped matches for *Dynamite* as part of the festivities.

As novel as a wrestling-themed cruise may seem to some, it's actually an idea that goes back more than 30 years, including WCW's Bruise Cruise back in 1991; the WWF's Wrestle Vessel in 1997; and TNA's Coastal Chaos Cruise in 2011.

More than just autograph signings and schmoozing opportunities, Jericho's cruise offers such offbeat attractions as a "Drunken Spelling Bee" and a game show titled "Are You Smarter Than Le Champion?"

Leave it to wrestling's master of reinvention to find a way to make an old idea relevant again.

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

Today, fans wax nostalgic for the Monday Night War of the 1990s. Truth be told, those weekly battles were pretty stressful for wrestling enthusiasts who didn't want to miss a minute of the action. If you were lucky enough to have more than one TV in your house connected to cable, your best option was to record one show on your VCR, while watching the other live.

Things sure have changed since then, as illustrated perfectly by one recent day of combat sports action. Ring of Honor's Final Battle pay-per-view, NXT's Deadline premium event, and UFC 282 all took place on December 10. While those events were staggered throughout the day, I had only that evening to take them all in—and take them all in, I did!

With NXT on my TV, UFC streaming on my iPhone, and Final Battle on my MacBook, I was able to follow all three shows at once without needing to run from room to room during commercial breaks.

It wasn't exactly easy, but it sure beat having to figure out that VCR timer.

THE WOMAN KING

Many fans' earliest memories of Stephanie McMahon may be as the 22-year-old damsel-in-distress, tied to the Undertaker's symbol and nearly forced to marry "The Dead Man" during a 1999 episode of *Monday Night Raw*. She's surely received a lot of ribbing about the angle over the years … and has surely told herself she did it for the good of WWE.

In the two-plus decades since, Stephanie has, on many other occasions, put her family business above all else—including her actual family. Months after nearly losing her husband, Paul "Triple H" Levesque, to a serious cardiac event, she opted last May to take a leave from her executives duties in WWE to spend more time at home. Amid her disgraced father Vince McMahon's "retirement" weeks later, she again answered the call to step into the role of co-CEO of WWE.

For the next six months, Stephanie did an admirable job of leading WWE, even while being put in the awkward position of having her husband take the company in a much different creative position than her father would have.

Alas, within days of Vince announcing his return to WWE, Stephanie announced she was resigning from the company and would "look forward to cheering on WWE … as a pure fan."

A McMahon running WWE who puts others first? It was good while it lasted. ☐

THE LOCKUP

BY BRIAN R. SOLOMON

WITH WRESTLEMANIA LOOMING, many people seem to assume that Roman Reigns' epic two-plus-year run as WWE Universal champion may at last be nearing its end. While that may be conventional wisdom, it's quite far from a foregone conclusion. Be that as it may, the approach of Roman Reigns' third consecutive WrestleMania as top dog in WWE seems as apropos a time as any to evaluate and recognize the incredible accomplishment that Reigns has pulled off this decade. It's something that will be looked back on by historians in years to come as one of the truly great wrestling stories of our era—and the emergence of one of the sport's iconic figures.

With years of dominance now under his belt, it's easy to forget that there was once a time when Roman Reigns was considered one of the most notorious failures in WWE history; a time when no one wanted to see him on their televisions, as opposed to recent times, when many would argue that he and The Bloodline have been the best thing *about* WWE television. How things have changed.

Still, anyone who was around during those harrowing days of old—way back in the 2010s—will tell you that this has been an incredible turnaround. Perhaps more than wins and title defenses, *that* has been the greatest achievement of Reigns' career. Where many other wrestlers would've given up, or, worse yet, been shown the door, he persevered and endured.

For anyone who may have forgotten, Roman Reigns was once the object of a level of total, vitriolic fan rejection that made John Cena look like the most universally beloved main-eventer in WWE history. From the get-go—perhaps due to his being a pure WWE developmental product, as opposed to Seth Rollins and Dean Ambrose, who had gotten significant seasoning prior to coming to WWE—Reigns was often considered the least of the three members of The Shield. He was seen as a guy with a great look, but not much more to offer.

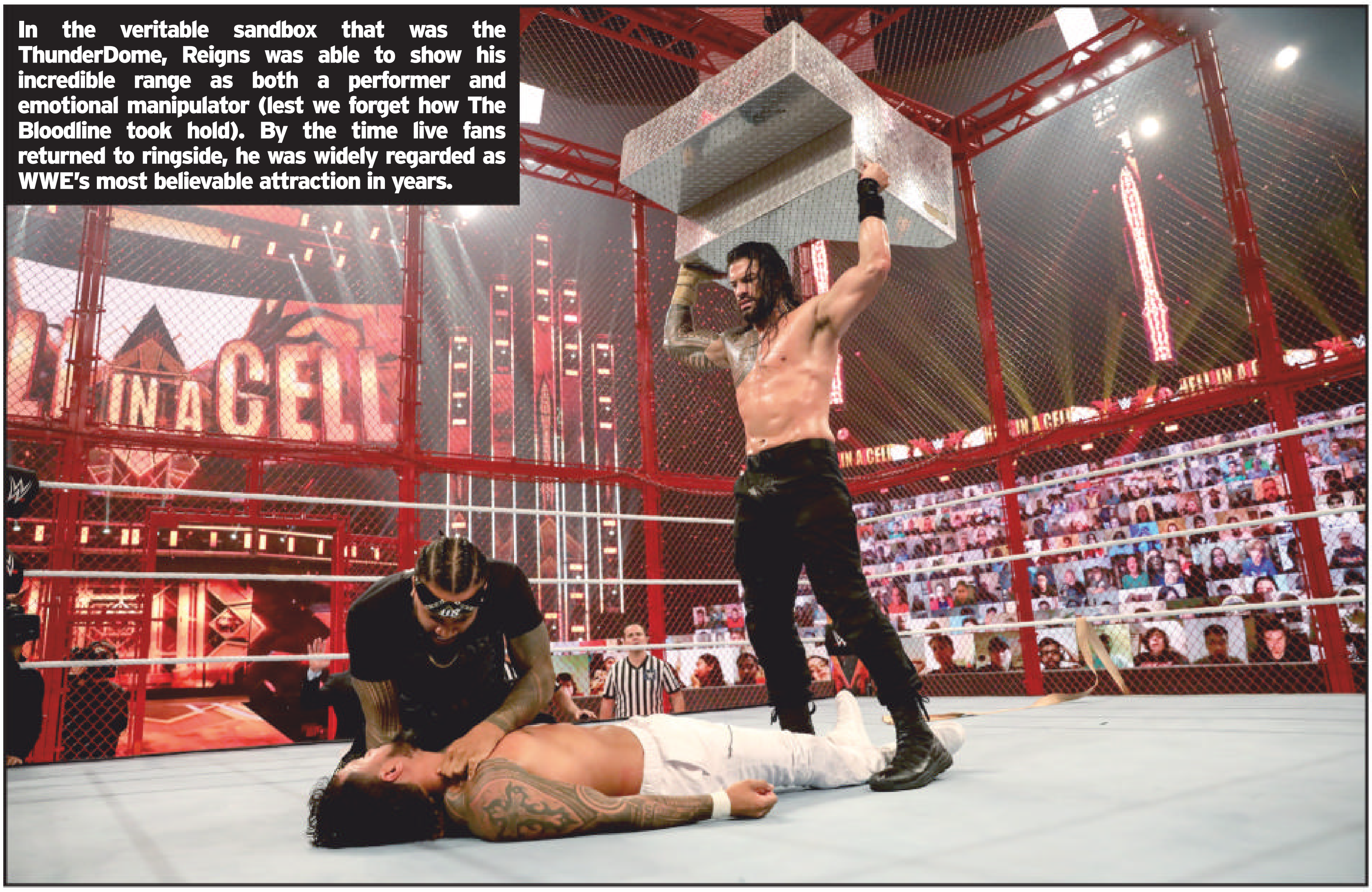
So, around 2015, when it looked like Vince McMahon had decided to strap the proverbial rocket to Reigns' back, fan reactions ranged from baffled and frustrated to downright angry. And boy, did they let Reigns know it.

In the years that followed, the would-be "Tribal Chief" learned to appreciate just how gracious and professional Cena had been through years of hearing "Cena Sucks!" chants everywhere he went. Reigns had much less of a poker face, and you could sense his frustration and disgust.

The harder WWE pushed him, the more fans hated him. For crying out loud, he was the only supposed "fan favorite" to ever win *PWI's* Most Hated Wrestler of the Year! Maybe it was due to his being seen as a replacement for Daniel Bryan (Bryan Danielson), whose short-lived rise in WWE had been a much more organic, grassroots

Roman Reigns greets some young fans at ringside at a 2016 house show in Rochester, Minnesota. During this time, the defending U.S. champ was more likely to be greeted by throngs of boos from the older demographics.

PHOTO BY WAYNE McCARTY



In the veritable sandbox that was the ThunderDome, Reigns was able to show his incredible range as both a performer and emotional manipulator (lest we forget how The Bloodline took hold). By the time live fans returned to ringside, he was widely regarded as WWE's most believable attraction in years.

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phenomenon. Whatever the case, nothing seemed to be able to change fans' minds on the wrestler WWE had prematurely dubbed "The Guy" and "The Big Dog."

Not even cancer was enough to win over the masses for very long. To be sure, when Reigns announced to the world that he was battling leukemia and stepping away from the ring, there was certainly concern and sympathy, as the real world broke through the illusory world of wrestling. And, when Reigns triumphantly returned, he did have the support of fans who were pulling for Joe Anoa'i, the human being. However, it didn't take long to dissipate once they realized it was business as usual again for Roman Reigns, the WWE superstar.

What it finally took to turn things around were two important developments. One of these was out of WWE's control: that being the emergence of a worldwide pandemic and lockdown that forced major changes to the way WWE TV could be produced. The other was Reigns finally embracing the role that fans had been clamoring for him to take on ever since the breakup of The Shield.

As it had done with Cena, WWE long resisted the temptation to give in to fan backlash and turn Reigns heel. But, unlike Cena, they finally pulled the trigger in mid-2020. As a result, Reigns was able to embrace his destiny as arguably WWE's premier rulebreaker since the heyday of Triple H.

Ironically, the lack of a live audience during the COVID lockdown era may have played a key role here. It was an experiment that WWE was willing to try in a bubble … in an environment they could completely control. In other words, fans couldn't hijack the proceedings. They were forced to simply watch from home on television.

But, in a weird way, this allowed Reigns to blossom in his position as the diabolical "Tribal Chief," building his Bloodline faction, hitting his stride with confident and compelling promos, and putting away challenger after challenger, month after month. It's reasonable to think that he may not have been able to get so far with it if the live crowd had continued to reject him on TV every week. Vince McMahon, with his notoriously capricious booking style, may very likely have pulled the plug. Instead, Reigns was allowed to really sink his teeth into being "Head Of The Table," settling into that role and making it his own.

This was how one of WWE's most polarizing figures of the past decade was able to successfully reinvent himself, to the point that those years of struggle are now a distant and faint memory. Regardless of what happens at WrestleMania, Roman Reigns will go down in history as one of the most dominant main-eventers and world champions that WWE has ever had; a generation-defining superstar who broke free from the bonds of diminished expectations and proved that sometimes you *can* come back from a bad first impression. And, whether or not the "Head Of The Table" relinquishes his seat for the moment, something tells me his era of dominance is very far from over. ☐

WIN, LOSE, or DRAW

BY HARRY BURKETT

MY CHILDHOOD AND teenage years were fortunate because I had never dealt with heavy personal losses. All of my grandparents were still alive, so dealing with grief was something I had yet to experience.

So, I'm cruising along in my senior year of college in early-1993, and I read in the newspaper (yes, the newspaper!) that Andre The Giant had died of a heart attack in Paris, shortly after attending his father's funeral on January 28. He was 46. It had taken two days for the news to be reported in the United States. I didn't cry, but this was my first experience losing someone who had been in my thoughts from a very young age. Frankly, on the 30th anniversary of his death, I'm still thinking about him.

Less than three weeks later, I read about Kerry Von Erich's suicide, again in the newspaper. Talk about a one-two punch. But, while Von Erich's death was even more tragic than Andre's, it was the mythic big man who haunted my memories. But what could I do? I needed to express my grief somehow.

I was studying journalism. And I wanted to write a robust tribute, complete with all his career achievements—what he had contributed to pro wrestling and our culture.

I began writing the first draft. Few people had word processors back then, so I took pencil to paper before committing my words to a typewriter, compiling Andre's list of highlights:

His departure from France and his early years in Quebec and then the AWA as "Jean Ferre" … Vincent J. McMahon signing Andre in 1973 and changing his ring name to "Andre The Giant" … His exhausting 300-matches-per-year schedule in the 1970s … His epic feuds with Don Leo Jonathan, Killer Khan, Blackjack Mulligan, and Big John Studd … His showdown with WWF World champion Hulk Hogan at WrestleMania 3 (perhaps the most legendary match of all-time) … His capture of Hogan's title on NBC's *Main Event*, the first pro wrestling show that had aired on network television in 30 years.

I wanted to remind people of Andre's greatness. Remember, Andre had been in a public physical decline in the final five years of his life. He had become a tag team wrestler, joining Haku (Meng) to form The Colossal Connection. He was no longer the Andre of the 1970s who could leap off the top turnbuckle. Haku did most of the work, and Andre finished off the match with a big boot.

At our local arena, I had watched Intercontinental champ The Ultimate Warrior wobble Andre with a few shoulderblocks and run through him with a series of clotheslines, pinning the "Eighth Wonder Of The World" in less than four minutes. This same match repeated itself at countless WWF events throughout North America in 1989.

Andre made a guest appearance at WCW Clash of the Champions in 1992, seeming to have shed a few pounds but needing to use crutches due to his back problems. Remarkably, Andre threw his crutches aside to turn in a limited performance with Shohei "Giant" Baba and Rusher Kimura to defeat Haruka Eigen, Masa Fuchi, and Motoshi Okuma at Tokyo's Budokan Hall on December 4 of that year (less than two months before his death).

The Giant belongs to the elite pantheon of legends who are equally known by wrestling fans

PHOTO BY BILL APTER

Always a larger-than-life figure, Andre The Giant is one of the rare examples of wrestling legends to have become a household name. Thirty years after Andre's passing, Harry Burkett reflects on his gigantic cultural footprint.

PHOTO BY THEO EHRET

Andre teaches Frankenstein's Monster a lesson in humility during a visit to Universal Studios Hollywood in the mid-1970s.

and the general public: Andre, Hulk Hogan, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and Gorgeous George (with honorable mentions to John Cena, Steve Austin, and Ric Flair). He was a guest on *The Tonight Show* as early as 1974 and portrayed Bigfoot in a 1977 episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man*. He appeared in several television shows and movies, but his proudest work was as Fezzik in *The Princess Bride*, now an all-time classic.

Andre The Giant has survived the test of cultural immortality. The fact that his legend looms as large in 2023 as it did in 1993 is proof of that. Whether you're talking about actors, athletes, or even political leaders, their achievements fade in the mists of time.

A select few grow in stature after their deaths. I'd include Martin Luther King Jr., Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Michael Jackson, John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, and Muhammad Ali. They all have immortalized reputations as the first, the greatest, or both.

Following Andre's death, it's obvious that WWE, specifically Vince McMahon, feels Andre—not Bruno Sammartino or Hulk Hogan—is the true legend of WWE. He was the first inductee into the WWE Hall of Fame in 1993. The Andre The Giant Memorial Battle Royal and the iconic statue of Andre have become staples of WrestleMania.

Why does someone's stature grow posthumously? The achievements are deemed important, not the weaknesses. We barely remember Andre losing to The Ultimate Warrior 53 times. His moment in front of 93,173 fans at the Pontiac Silverdome will never be forgotten. Another truth: With time, your competition tends to fade away. Maybe Ernie Ladd, Kamala, Big John Studd, and King Kong Bundy were darn good, but the legend of Andre is the only one left standing.

And it's unlikely the wrestling industry can ever produce another mythic giant such as Andre. To create a myth, one must have an element of the unknown. That doesn't exist today. Aware that ticket sales had dwindled in Montreal because he'd stayed there too long, Vince McMahon Sr. protected Andre as a novelty. The Giant made occasional appearances at New York's Madison Square Garden and around the Northeast, but was frequently leased out to New Japan Pro-Wrestling, Mexico, and North American territories. Watching *Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling* as a kid, I was very impressed by the drawing of Andre that hung in the WRAL-TV studio in the weeks preceding his tour of the Carolinas and Virginia.

Andre never stayed in one area long enough to become a contender. His infrequent title matches against NWA World champion Harley Race or AWA World champion Nick Bockwinkel, for example, ended in time-limit draws or disqualifications on the titleholder's behalf. If Andre lost to someone much smaller in size, he'd lose credibility. If he won the title, he would need to be champion forever—and that wasn't good for business.

I've had empathy for the talented big men who have graced our business in recent years—Paul Wight, in particular, and now men such as Omos and Satnam Singh—who must work in Andre's shadow. Perhaps WWE and AEW should use the Andre method with Omos and Singh by frequently lending them out to other promotions so they don't grow stale at home.

As for me, it's been cathartic for me to write about Andre at length for the second time in 30 years. "The Giant Sleeps: A Farewell To Andre" was my first feature, published in the July 1993 issue of *Wrestling Eye*. Editor Helene Bleich sent me a kind note, inviting me to contribute more features, but, alas, that turned out to be the final issue of that magazine after an eight-year run. My wrestling journalism career would have to wait.

Wrestling Eye is no more, but Andre lives forever! ☐

PWI ROUNDTABLE

OUR EDITORIAL STAFF DISCUSSES KEY TOPICS PERTAINING TO THE INDUSTRY

WILL WWE BE SOLD?

IN LIEU OF our usual "Hotseat" interview, we felt it was important to devote additional coverage to recent news and rumors regarding the future of World Wrestling Entertainment. As we send this issue to press, the industry is still reacting to the January 2023 return of Vince McMahon to WWE—ostensibly, to facilitate a sale and/or media rights negotiations. Despite initial objections from the company's board of directors, WWE's majority shareholder leveraged his voting power to reinstate himself as chairman, while bringing back former WWE Co-Presidents George Barrios and Michelle Wilson to sit on the board.

McMahon's actions necessitated the exits of three existing board members, while two others left voluntarily after the controversial WWE founder's return. Joining those five individuals in their departure was Vince's daughter Stephanie, resigning from her post as co-CEO.

Rumors of an imminent sale began to pick up steam, emboldened by a BodySlam.net report that Saudi Arabia's Investment Fund (SIF) had purchased the company and would be taking it private. Though such reports were, at the very least, premature, the SIF remained on the shortlist of potential buyers, alongside U.S.-based companies including Comcast, Disney, and even AEW co-owners Tony and father Shad Khan.

At press time, WWE CEO Nick Khan continued on in his role, while Paul "Triple H" Levesque served as head of WWE Creative. Vince McMahon, after retiring last summer amidst an investigation into his alleged misconduct, has reportedly returned to his office in Stamford, CT, to focus on his duties as chairman.

In this "**PWI** Roundtable," the implications of WWE's potential sale are discussed by writers Al Castle and Brian R. Solomon, along with Editor-in-Chief Kevin McElvaney.

Castle: Last year, we had Vince McMahon stepping down, and then we had whatever it was—six or seven months there—which, in some ways, was like WWE paradise. Sure enough, Vince McMahon is back, and that's only part of the story. He is back to facilitate a sale of WWE. Stephanie McMahon is gone, some others are gone. And, frankly, to each his own, but certainly for me and a lot of the people that I follow, this doesn't feel like good news. Brian, I'll ask you: Is there a way that this becomes good news?

Solomon: The only person this is good news for is Vince McMahon. I don't know. I guess I overestimated Vince's similarity to other human beings, in the sense that anybody else in his shoes, at his age, accomplishing what he has, with the wealth that he has, having grandchildren, and all that stuff, would have just been like, *You know what? I'm good. You guys do this, I'm gonna let the money roll in, I'm gonna go to Italy.* Which I guess he did for a month.

[He essentially] said, *Screw it. I'm just coming back. Yeah, there's a board of directors. Guess what? I'm the majority voter, so I'm just going to change the board. And let's have a vote. Should I be the chairman? Oh, great! I'm the chairman now.* No one would have been shameless enough to do that, except for him. And I do think a big part of it, is the fact that they seemed to be doing better without him. I think this is very much a case of "if I can't have it, no one's going to have it."

Oh, you're gonna vote against me to come back? … Which they all did, by the way! Including Nick Khan, who was just effusively admiring Vince McMahon on Bill Simmons' podcast, he voted against him coming back. Stephanie (McMahon) voted against. Hunter (Triple H) voted against. I think that was the spark that set off the powder keg of, basically, *I'm going to now just sell this thing, and screw all of you*.

You can couch it in whatever kind of "benefiting the shareholders" and all this mumbo jumbo that they put out there to justify it. But I really think that's what it is. It was going to be sold [regardless]. The difference is, with Vince not in the picture, he has no say over anything. He loses all power, because even his majority voting power would be gone once it's sold. He wanted to be there because he knows that if he sells it, he could put in whatever qualifications and riders and requirements that benefit him the most—including, most likely, some type of power or authority in whatever the new version of the company will be. It is just an extremely self-serving move.

Castle: The one thing that Nick Khan talked about that does ring true, for better or for worse, is this notion that this was Vince's company. Maybe it was naive all along to think that anything other than this was going to happen, especially given that he was still majority shareholder. Is there the potential to finally make that clean break? I would think that would be more likely with a sale to an Amazon or an NBC Universal (Comcast), less likely with the one that's been the most rumored—which is a Saudi sale, where they would go private. I mean, they sell to the Saudis, they go back to being private, zero accountability. Vince is installed as kind of the dictator of the whole thing. And I think that's bad for everyone. I just don't see an upside to that at all.

McElvaney: Yeah, I think there was quite a bit of reasonable concern when that was being strongly suggested that's where things were headed. Of course, any rumors that popped up on social media around that being an inevitability? Well, that's not quite the case. There are certain hurdles you have to clear, as Nick Khan said on the Bill Simmons podcast. There are shareholders that need to be notified. You can't just sell a giant, publicly traded corporation overnight.

However, there was this quality—and this is just my personal intuition here—in the language that Vince used when he was attempting to get back to his seat as chairman of the board of directors. *Hey, I know about this great opportunity we have, but the only way we can do it is if I come back on board and lead this sale.* What did he know? Who was he talking to already?

I mean, there's evidence, also, that he was meeting with people from other companies. Regardless, you have a situation where, if [WWE] is turned private again, and Vince is given free rein over it, I don't think that's good for anybody in terms of job security, in terms of how the show is run, the creative process. I don't think most people, even diehard defenders of the old way that Vince was doing things, could reasonably argue that the show is not better now—*Raw*, *Smackdown*, anything.

You've had some people ousted from the board of directors, you've had others step down, you've had Stephanie resign from the company. You've had the heads of Communications and Public Relations for the company who are now just completely out, including Adam Hopkins. I mean, he was there for the better part of a quarter of a century, and now he's gone. I do think we're headed towards a sale, but I don't think this is a great situation for WWE to be in.

Solomon: I also think it's a sad state of affairs in terms of accountability. You mentioned Adam Hopkins. I want to say, because I knew them both, somebody else who had been there almost as long as he was there … not as well known to outsiders, but another VP, Stefanie Fiondella. The reason I mention her is because Stefanie started there straight out of college. I mean, just an absolute success story. One of the things she did within the company: She headed up a group that was created by Stefanie, for female employees of WWE—you know, in a male-dominated industry—to make connections, to share information, to kind of have a safe space there. She resigned. I don't know the ins and outs of it. But you can't tell me that at least part of that wasn't because, like, *How can I get up in the morning? I am the head of the of this women's resource group within WWE. This man is now back and running things. What am I supposed to tell all these female employees?*

Another thing, related to that, hearing Nick Khan [on Bill Simmons' podcast]. One of the things that bugged me to no end was him describing the Rita Chatterton allegations [former referee Chatterton accused McMahon of sexual assault in the 1980s] as basically just an obstacle and an encumbrance, is the words he used, to a sale.

McElvaney: Did you see the *Wall Street Journal* report yesterday [January 19] relating to Rita Chatterton?

Castle: There was a settlement.

Solomon: Yeah, there was a settlement. And he probably already knew about that, because it happened last month.

Castle: I am trying to be optimistic, and there's very little to be optimistic about. But this is a circumstance where if the company is sold, and it goes in the right hands, it could be an improvement. Because there is such a stink to Vince McMahon that you would think a legitimate corporation that bought WWE would want to get as far away from [him] as possible. I can't imagine that a Comcast-owned WWE, or an Amazon-owned WWE, or Disney, or I don't know who else is in the discussion, would be okay with it. Now, the flipside, you go private, you go to the Saudi government and forget about it. I mean, all bets are off. But, you know, it kind of makes me root for a Comcast to make a deal that is too good to turn down, and the company remains public.

And it's sort of a shame that we're even having this discussion, this guy who was like the father of pro wrestling. But I think, at this point, it's sort of indisputable that he's just a complete negative force. I don't see the upside to Vince McMahon running WWE at all.

Solomon: But here's the problem with a Comcast or somebody else like that coming in. This is a company where their main source of revenue is media rights fees. If you own the company, where is the income coming from? So, Comcast goes, *Oh, we're paying all this money for media rights fees to WWE, because of Peacock and USA Network. Let's just buy them*. Great. So, now nobody's paying media rights fees to anybody.

This is not Marvel. This is not Star Wars. I don't know if the upside is as strong, especially when you have to sit across the table from someone like Vince McMahon, that you have to hold your nose to begin with. I don't know how attractive of a buy it is.

Castle: It's content, though. If you're ever on Peacock, so much of it is WWE. It really has got to be one of the big drivers of subscriptions. So, it's content and, I mean, the difference between renting or owning. Maybe it makes sense for them to own it, just so you're not shelling out the money. But right, I mean, where's the revenue there? Live attendance is fine. I think it's better than it's been in the past, but ...

Solomon: The numbers they're doing in live attendance now, if they were doing them 20 years ago, they'd be going out of business, you know?

McElvaney: Right. But their model has shifted so much. I mean, they're not like a New Japan, where so much of it is based on the live gates. It is, as Al said, the media rights. You generate money through digital channels, as well, like YouTube. You generate money through merchandise, selling stuff at WWE Shop and at live events. Sometimes, there's a tendency to look at those things as the cherry on top, but those can be great drivers of revenue, as well.

Castle: A couple other names that have been floated that are really intriguing: One is the Khan family, Tony Khan and his father. If they ended up buying WWE, and there was some kind of merger … I don't know how realistic that is beyond the fact that we know the Khans have a crap ton of money.

McElvaney: They don't have Comcast money, though!

Solomon: If they were to do it, they would need to have somebody backing them. It couldn't be Shad Khan writing a check.

Castle: And then the other one—and I think what you just said certainly applies here, too—is Dwayne Johnson. Could he be part of some investor group that could buy WWE? I'd be less bullish about that. I think, in that scenario, we could see Vince McMahon stick around. Because I think there's a lot of reverence and respect there, Johnson for McMahon.

.PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Vince McMahon's hand is raised, following his victory over color commentator Pat McAfee at WrestleMania 38. Since then, the now-77-year-old McMahon has drawn countless headlines through scandals, his purported retirement last July, and subsequent January 2023 return to WWE.

Castle: This is a really important part of the story. And that is Stephanie and Triple H. Stephanie put out the diplomatic statement saying she wants to return to spending time with her family, and she's gonna be cheering WWE on. I'm sure there's a lot more to it than that. Triple H has reportedly now held a couple of meetings with talent over the last couple of weeks, offering reassurances that nothing is going to change. This is what you hear whenever there's a big management shift or ownership shift. And that might be the case for the moment. But I don't believe even Triple H believes that, right? How long before Vince is back on the headset screaming in Michael Cole's ear?

McElvaney: Oh, no!

Solomon: Yeah, and Michael Cole, who's been doing somersaults, essentially, since Vince has been gone.

Castle: It's got to be just so deflating for everybody over there.

Solomon: I think there's going to be books written about this, documentaries. There's so much going on that we don't know right now. There's got to be so much turmoil, because this is not normal, especially the Stephanie situation. *I'm leaving, I'm back, I'm leaving again.* That's just not a normal way to run a business, no matter how you want to rationalize it.

Castle: It's sort of heartbreaking. Because, again, we had a few months there where you saw how good it could be. And all you heard was stories of wrestlers being happy to come to work. And we've all had those jobs, right, where you've got the right manager, and it's just great. The morale in the locker room is great. And then, you know, Kevin gets hired!

McElvaney: Well, then!

Castle: I kid.

Solomon: I thought you were going a different direction with that, and you were gonna knock Stu!

Castle: No, definitely not any of my *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* experience, but in other jobs, for sure. And it's just deflating. I think, for so long, wrestlers (and everybody in WWE) didn't know anything else. Brian, you could speak to this. You lived it. You used to work for WWE.

Solomon: Right. I was gonna say, I've had that experience literally at the exact company we're talking about right now.

Castle: Was there ever a semblance of this in management changes at the [WWE] magazines?

Solomon: It was, because Vince was always very hands-on. We used to laugh about how this would be like if (former Walt Disney Company CEO) Michael Eisner had to approve Goofy baseball hats at Disney. Like, if they would bring him to Design, and he had to pick which one. That's the level of control that Vince always wanted.

The problem is, it would trickle down. So, we don't have to deal with him on a daily basis. But we did have a period where we had to deal with Shane on a daily basis. He was our boss. And look, it's a complicated relationship. Shane is a very nice guy, but he had his dad on him. And so, as a result of that, it trickled down, and it was like he felt like he had to act almost as the proxy of his dad. So, he changed a lot.

The experience I had, it became like what TV was with Vince: very hectic, crazy hours, on-call, things changing at the last minute, 40 different covers for approval … like, just madness.

I don't think he would have run it that way, Shane, if he got to do it his own way. It didn't need to be run that way. That's what it became. And it was because of that, I hate to say it, it's that toxicity of having somebody like that at the top. It infects everything. ☐

MERCEDES MONE'S

AS OF JANUARY 1, 2023, SASHA BANKS WAS NO MORE, AND MERCEDES "MONE" VARNADO WAS OFFICIALLY UNTETHERED TO WWE. THREE DAYS LATER, SHE TOOK PART IN A TOKYO DOME SHOW THAT BLEW MINDS AND SHRUNK THE GLOBE

WORLD TOUR

"THE CEO" MAKES HEADLINES AT WRESTLE KINGDOM ALONGSIDE SOME HEAVY HITTERS

TEXT BY KEVIN McELVANEY

PHOTOS BY ISSA MARIE (EXCEPT WHERE NOTED)

NEVER
OPENWEIGHT
CHAMPION

DON'T CALL HER "The Boss." The former Sasha Banks has a new name and a new job title, anointing herself "The CEO" of women's competition at New Japan Pro-Wrestling and World Wonder Ring Stardom. Though the gig may not come with a plush corner office or a devoted personal assistant, it apparently pays pretty handsomely. Prior to her official on-screen debut at Wrestle Kingdom 17, January 4 at the Tokyo Dome, Mercedes Mone had reportedly inked a deal with Bushiroad that saw her become the highest-paid wrestler in the company's history, earning north of the six-figure mark *per show*.

That may seem like a lot of money—and, no doubt, it is—but consider the upsides. Mone brings to the table a rabid fan base, not just from her celebrated, decade-long run in WWE, but also her work as Koska Reeves on the hit *Star Wars* show, *The Mandalorian*. Thousands of first-time New Japan viewers across several time zones burned the midnight oil to catch Wrestle Kingdom live, based solely on a strongly rumored, non-wrestling appearance.

Japan's top promotion later reported a record number of live viewers on its NJPW World streaming service,

Mercedes Mone poses for photographers after her inaugural NJPW appearance at Wrestle Kingdom 17.

which was due in no small part to Mone's involvement. Then, on the strength of a single match-up—"The CEO" challenging Stardom's KAIRI (Sane) for the IWGP Women's title—New Japan quickly sold out the San Jose Civic theater, capacity 2,850, for its February Battle in the Valley event.

In short, there's a good reason why Mone, with her moneymaking potential and devoted "stans," is on the cover of this magazine. And it's easy to see why Bushiroad wants her to lock up in rings at both of its wrestling properties, New Japan and Stardom. Without even competing, she was the talk of a Wrestle Kingdom event that included talent from both AEW and WWE. But don't get it twisted: Heaps of fans tuned in for two contemporary icons of New Japan, Kenny Omega and Kazuchika Okada, who again emerged as champions after the annual January 4 supercard.

As discussed by Harry Burkett in this issue's "Ringside" column, Okada's seventh career IWGP heavyweight title win was all but academic. The most celebrated New Japan star of his generation, "The Rainmaker" earned a title match with the defending Jay White by winning his fourth career G1 Climax

KAIRI reels after being attacked by the debuting "CEO."

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CAMPIONESSA DEL MONDO

GIULIA DEFEATS SYURI FOR STARDOM'S RED BELT

Former squad-mates in the fashionably dominant Donna Del Mondo faction, Giulia and Syuri have since gone their separate ways. Syuri, soon after becoming World champion in December 2021, had the desire to start her own unit, dubbed "God's Eye." Though they had become close friends—and reigned for nine months as co-tag team champions—the former Alto Livello KABALIWAN had grown apart as a pair. And, quite tellingly, each woman felt as if she had outgrown their alliance.

The popular Stardom wrestlers continued to fare well, even without the mutual support they'd once enjoyed. Syuri reigned throughout 2022 as World of Stardom champ (wearing the prestigious "Red Belt"), with one of her earliest defenses being against Giulia in March. This precipitated a remarkable growth period for both Syuri and Stardom that was decisively recognized by *PWI*: Syuri was ranked #1 in last year's "Women's 150," making her the first wrestler in a non-U.S. promotion to achieve that honor.

For her part, Giulia refused to be upstaged, winning the 2022 5STAR Grand Prix tournament and earning a title shot at Stardom Dream Queendom on December 29.

In previous encounters, the two women were closely matched. The pre-match video shown at Dream Queendom included clips from those prior battles, including one memorable draw. Still, most observers felt that this would be the night when Giulia finally scored the all-important win over her former ally.

And, sure enough, those observers were correct. In an emotional and heart-wrenching bout spanning almost 30 minutes, the two athletes wielded just about every move from their respective arsenals … and even one another's! They fought all around ringside, where Syuri piledrove Giulia through a table. Ultimately, the challenger was able to put away her estranged friend with her variation of Mitsuharu Misawa's Emerald Flowsion.

After the match, the two reconciled—at least, for the moment—with Syuri placing the "Red Belt" around Giulia's waist in a sign of immense respect. It was a touching and fitting end to a friendship-turned-rivalry that, over the course of two years, has seen these two wrestlers transform into world-class superstars.

STARDOM
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STARDOM
Stardom World

Kazuchika Okada, seen here at the January 5 New Year Dash event, looks to be a steadying force for New Japan in his latest reign as the company's top champ.

tournament last fall. With rumors swirling that "Switchblade" White's NJPW contract was up, analysts were even more certain that his time as IWGP World titleholder was nearing an end. Sure enough, Okada pinned his opponent in front of 26,085 grateful fans and left the Tokyo Dome with the company's most esteemed prize.

The Aichi, Japan, native is both loyal to his home promotion and reliably one of its most exciting in-ring performers in any given year. His win was a feel-good story to close out the show, which was held in tribute to NJPW's recently deceased founder, Antonio Inoki.

Speaking of exciting in-ring work, Kenny Omega is, of course, an EVP of All Elite Wrestling, and, at press time, one-third of World trios champs The Elite. Following a lengthy injury hiatus—and, more recently, a suspension stemming from a backstage incident between his crew and CM Punk—the pressure was on for the Winnipeg native in a long-anticipated singles bout with the wildly innovative Will Ospreay. Along with heaps of pride and integrity, Ospreay put up his IWGP U.S. title against Omega, who (fun fact) was the belt's inaugural holder after defeating Tomohiro Ishii in July 2017.

Nearing the 35-minute mark, "The Cleaner" successfully hit his British foe with the One-Winged Angel, securing his first New Japan title since departing the company in 2019 for All Elite Wrestling. A devastated Ospreay, who'd competed in a whopping *eight* five-star matches in 2022 (per Dave Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*), seemed extremely distraught over the loss in his post-match comments. One silver lining: The contest, like several previous encounters involving either one of these men, shattered the five-star scale and earned a 6.25 rating.

Kenny Omega wasn't the only AEW star to step out at the big event. He was joined by FTR, who defended their IWGP heavyweight tag team belts against former champions Bishamon (Hirooki Goto & YOSHI-HASHI). During the bout, announcer Kevin Kelly took *PWI* to task for failing to rank the latter duo on our 2022 "Tag Team 100" list. While the nature of the perceived snub can be argued, what cannot be debated is the cohesion the two CHAOS members display between bells. Bishamon wound up taking the match, along with the IWGP tag title—the last championship in the triumvirate of titles FTR held coming out of the June 2022 Forbidden Door event.

While AEW had previously allowed its talent (namely, Jon Moxley) to compete at Wrestle Kingdom, fans were notably more shocked at the inclusion of Karl Anderson on the card. "Machine Gun" Anderson is a longtime member of the Bullet Club who, when he inked his most recent WWE deal, still reigned as NEVER openweight champion for New Japan. After a successful defense over Hikuleo in late-2022, Anderson made his second title defense as a contracted WWE talent on January 4 at the Tokyo Dome.

The "Good Brother" would not fare nearly so well against Hikuleo's brother, Tama Tonga, who most certainly wrestled like he had something to prove. Tonga won the match and the NEVER openweight belt, which is traditionally associated with the hard-hitting strong style popularized by NJPW. Anderson returned to WWE soon after, as did Shinsuke Nakamura, who wrestled The Great Muta a few days earlier at Pro Wrestling NOAH's New Year show (see sidebar).

The night began with a three-match pre-show, which was headlined by a six-man tag contested in tribute to Antonio Inoki. Apart from the offerings mentioned to this point, Wrestle Kingdom 17 also featured Muta/Keiji Muto's final match in a New Japan ring, along with several additional title bouts: Hiromu Takahashi winning his fifth IWGP junior heavyweight title in a four-way dance; Zack Sabre Jr. besting rising star Ren Narita to become inaugural TV champion; and Catch 22 (Francesco Akira & TJP) retaining their junior heavyweight tag title over Super Junior Tag League winners Lio Rush & YOH.

This leaves the championship match between IWGP Women's titleholder KAIRI and challenger Tam Nakano. Representing

NJPW WORLD
SAPPORO
IWGP
UNITED STATES
CHAMPION

Kenny Omega engages the press gathered at Wrestle Kingdom, after once again claiming the mantle of IWGP U.S. champ (top). His opponent, Will Ospreay (bottom), is both bloodied and bowed.

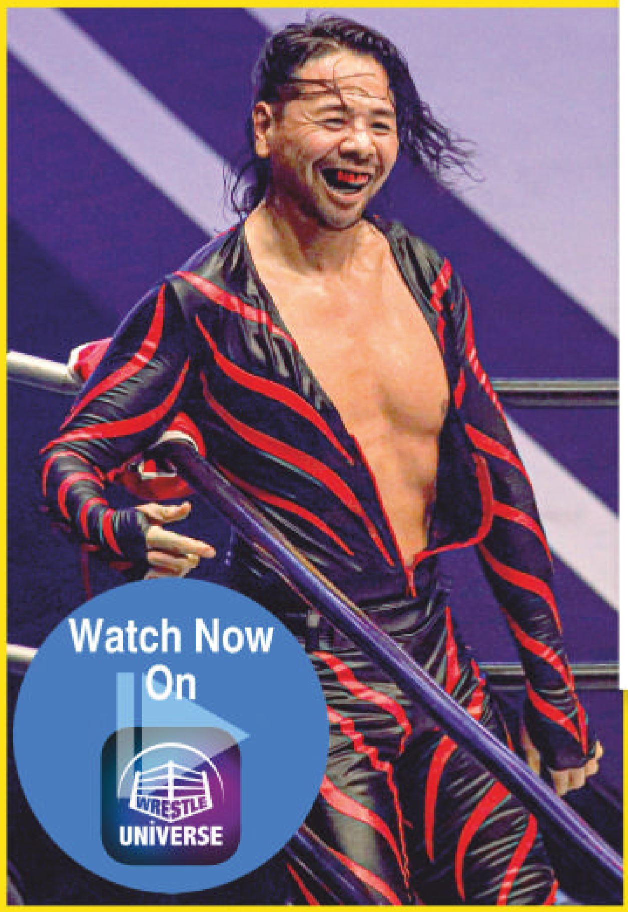
YOUR MIST IS ON MY LIPS

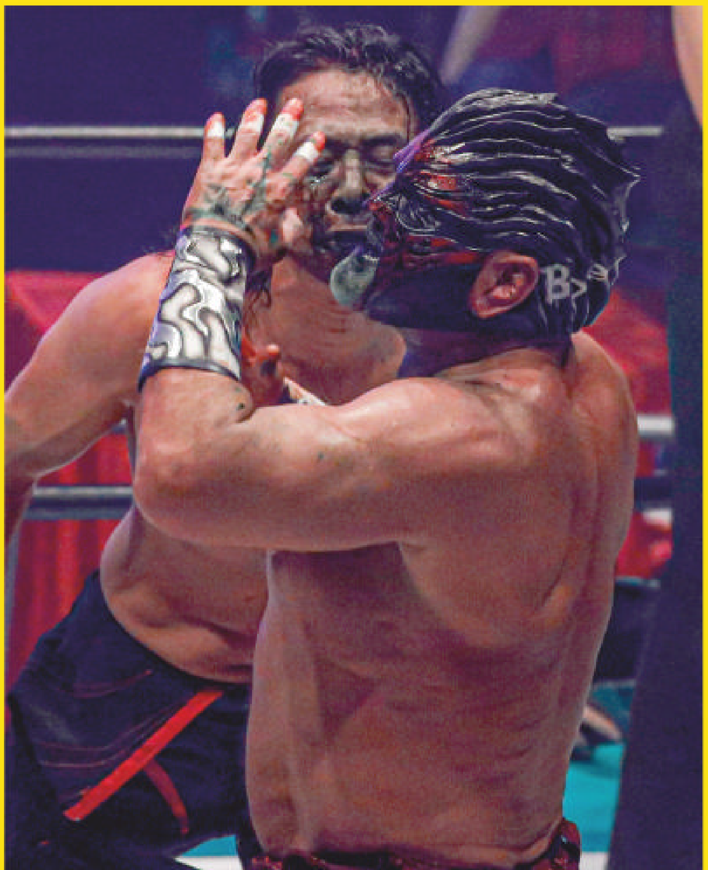
SHINSUKE NAKAMURA BEATS GREAT MUTA IN WILD ROW

When Shinsuke Nakamura was announced as Keiji Muto's opponent for Pro Wrestling NOAH's annual New Year card, social media users initially assumed the match graphic was a clever, though well-made forgery, done by the likes of Twitter user @Toms_Customs. In truth, the Smackdown star (a former NXT and Intercontinental champion) had been tapped as one of the final opponents for the man who defeated him for the IWGP heavyweight championship in 2008. WWE, not known for allowing "Forbidden Door" bookings involving its talent, had granted an exception for Nakamura to make the trek to Japan and do battle with his old rival … one final time.

Of course, Nakamura wasn't *exactly* locking horns with Keiji Muto. Instead, he was going to war with the more sinister, more demonic incarnation of the wrestler, who first emerged on U.S. soil decades prior as The Great Muta. Despite the veteran's advancing age and relative limitations in the ring, there was no doubt that Great Muta would bring the fight to "The King Of Strong Style" Nakamura.

Predictably, the match was not a technical classic, but a wild and violent affair that spilled outside of the ring and saw each man (and/or demon) try desperate measures in attempts to pull out the win. Muta spat his poison Red Mist into the eyes of his younger rival, countering Nakamura's attempt to put him away with his Kinshasa running knee strike. When that didn't work, Muta prepared to spit his poison Green Mist. Nakamura was ready for this and, placing his lips to Muta's, sucked the blinding liquid into his own mouth. He then spat the Green Mist into Muta's face, leaving him vulnerable to a Kinshasa and the deciding pinfall.





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No, Jay White isn't foaming at the mouth. He's just struggling to catch his breath while being locked in Okada's Money Clip hold.

Stardom, the two accomplished striker/high-flyers competed in a quick, yet intense match-up, that saw KAIRI retain with her trademark Insane Elbow. Fans in attendance were not afforded much time to react, as the Tokyo Dome soon darkened for the non-wrestling debut of Mercedes Mone, donning new gear and striking orange-and-blue hair. Mone stated her intentions to take down the reigning champ at Battle in the Valley, set for February 18 in San Jose, California. Then, she left her former WWE coworker lying in a heap with her new finishing maneuver, a modified DDT variation spun out from a Gory Guerrero Special. Though the move did not go off exactly as planned, "The CEO" had most certainly made her point.

Under the watchful eye of Hikuleo, Tama Tonga and Karl Anderson make nice after their NEVER openweight title bout. Bullet Club is, as they say, for life.

Following her loss to KAIRI, a visibly crestfallen Tam Nakano takes refuge in her friend and tag team partner Natsupoi.

In the press area backstage, Mone seemingly intimidated (or, perhaps, shocked) the gathered press, who were reticent to ask questions until *PWI* photographer and Japan correspondent Issa Marie spoke up: Who would Bushiroad's latest international star like to face, beyond KAIRI?

Mone replied with an ambitious list of names that should be familiar to astute readers of this magazine, including Stardom's AZM, Tokyo Joshi Pro's Miyu Yamashita, the legendary Aja Kong, and recent Stanley Weston Award recipient Manami Toyota (should the great joshi competitor want to step out of retirement). She also indicated that she wishes to compete in Mexico, where she recently spent

Bishamon successfully leveraged their 2022 World Tag League win into another title victory, this time unseating FTR for the honors. Pay close attention to this duo, as they look to be even more dominant in 2023.

STRONG SPIRITS
LAWSON STATION
ふわるん
マスク
JRA
IWGP
吉野家
YOSHINOYA

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"The Cleaner" rocks Ospreay with another V-Trigger.

time training with CMLL stars, and back in the United States.

Fans on social media were abuzz about the comments, chiming in with other dream matchups "The CEO" might have. Considering the stacked Stardom roster—the likes of January 2023 *PWI* cover stars Syuri, Saya Kamitani, and Starlight Kid; Tam Nakano and her Cosmic Angels; even the recently crowned World of Stardom champ (and fellow fashion plate) Giulia—there's no shortage of opportunities in Japan for the former Ms. Banks. Far from taking her out of the spotlight, Mone's departure from WWE at the end of 2022 has helped to make her one of the most in-demand global attractions in the game.

Will Mercedes Mone debut for All Elite Wrestling, as was rumored after her Wrestle Kingdom appearance? Will she ultimately return to WWE, even stronger from her international excursions? Or will she continue to be, pun intended, her own "Boss" for the foreseeable future?

Time will reveal all, as they say. However, we can be certain that Mone's arrival coincided with a huge moment for pro wrestling in Japan. After nearly three years of pandemic-driven modifications to the New Japan and Stardom business structures, international competitors are now very much back in the picture. Fans were even permitted to cheer (with some limitations) at Wrestle Kingdom for the first time since 2020.

In a year that is already full of shocking and harrowing news stories, the participation of Mone, Kenny Omega, Karl Anderson, and FTR at the January 4, 2023, Tokyo Dome show stands apart as a major win for grappling fans. After all, from WWE and AEW to New Japan and Stardom, IMPACT and AAA to NOAH and RevPro, and the biggest stadium shows to rowdy rasslin' events at VFW halls, it's all part of the same weird, wonderful, spectacular mishmash … that "King Of Sports" we call professional wrestling. ■

This is the face of a woman who knows what she wants. In 2023, that means conquering NJPW and Stardom, along with anyone else who dares stand in the way of Mercedes Mone.

ARENA REPORTS: "NEW YEAR IN JAPAN" EDITION

Note: These are the full results from the events mentioned specifically in the preceding article. For more match results from outside Japan, see "Arena Reports" starting on page 72.

NJPW New Year Dash at Ota City General Gymnasium: **Dick Togo**, **EVIL**, & **Yujiro Takahashi** defeated **Ren Narita**, **Tiger Mask**, & **Tomoaki Honma** … **DOUKI**, **Taichi**, & **Yoshinobu Kanemaru** beat **Francesco Akira**, **TJP**, & **Will Ospreay** … **Mikey Nicholls**, **Shane Haste**, & **Zack Sabre Jr.** defeated **Hirooki Goto**, **Tomohiro Ishii**, & **YOSHI-HASHI** … **Ryusuke Taguchi**, **Shota Umino**, **Togi Makabe**, & **YOH** defeated **BUSHI**, **Hiromu Takahashi**, **SANADA**, & **Tetsuya Naito** … **Hikuleo**, **Hiroshi Tanahashi**, **Master Wato**, & **Tama Tonga** beat **El Phantasmo**, **Jay White**, **KENTA**, & **Taiji Ishimori** by DQ … **Shingo Takagi** defeated **Great-O-Khan**, **SHO**, and **Toru Yano** in a four-way to win the vacant KOPW Provisional championship … **Kazuchika Okada** & **Kenny Omega** beat **Aaron Henare** & **Jeff Cobb**.
(01-05-23)

NJPW Wrestle Kingdom 17 at the Tokyo Dome: **Boltin Oleg** wrestled **Ryohei Oiwa** to a time-limit draw … **Great-O-Khan**, **Shingo Takagi**, **SHO**, and **Toru Yano** won the New Japan Ranbo battle royal to advance to the KOPW title bout at New Year Dash … **Satoshi Kojima**, **Togi Makabe**, & **Yuji Nagata** defeated **Minoru Suzuki**, **Tatsumi Fujinami**, & **Tiger Mask** in the Antonio Inoki Tribute match … IWGP junior heavyweight tag team champions **Francesco Akira** & **TJP** beat **Lio Rush** & **YOH** to retain … IWGP Women's champion **KAIRI** defeated **Tam Nakano** to retain … **Hirooki Goto** & **YOSHI-HASHI** defeated IWGP heavyweight tag team champions **Cash Wheeler** & **Dax Harwood** to win the title … **Zack Sabre Jr.** defeated **Ren Narita** to win the inaugural TV title … **Tama Tonga** beat NEVER openweight champion **Karl Anderson** to win the title … **Hiroshi Tanahashi**, **Keiji Muto**, & **Shota Umino** defeated **BUSHI**, **SANADA**, & **Tetsuya Naito** … **Hiromu Takahashi** defeated **El Desperado**, **Master Wato**, and IWGP junior heavyweight champion **Taiji Ishimori** to win the title … **Kenny Omega** beat IWGP U.S. champion **Will Ospreay** to win the title … **Kazuchika Okada** defeated IWGP World heavyweight champion **Jay White** to win the title.
(01-04-23)

Pro Wrestling NOAH The New Year at Nippon Budokan: **Yasutaka Yano** defeated **Taishi Ozawa** … **Daiki Inaba**, **Masa Kitamiya**, & **Yoshiki Inamura** defeated **Akitoshi Saito**, **Mohammed Yone**, & **Shuhei Taniguchi** … **Alejandro**, **Dante Leon**, & **Ninja Mack** beat **Hi69**, **Shuji Kondo**, & **Tadasuke** … **Masaaki Mochizuki**, **Mochizuki Jr.**, & **Susumu Mochizuki** defeated **Atsushi Kotoge**, **El Hijo Del Dr. Wagner Jr.**, & **Seiki Yoshioka** … **Hiroshi Hase**, **Kazuyuki Fujita**, **Kendo Kashin**, & **NOSAWA Rongai** beat **Hajime Ohara**, **Katsuhiko Nakajima**, **Manabu Soya**, & **Masakatsu Funaki** … **Jack Morris** beat **Timothy Thatcher** … GHC junior heavyweight champion **AMAKUSA** defeated **Junta Miyawaki** to retain … GHC tag team champions **Satoshi Kojima** & **Takashi Sugiura** beat **KENTA** & **Naomichi Marufuji** to retain … **Eita** & **Yoshinari Ogawa** beat GHC junior heavyweight tag team champions **Kzy** & **YO-HEY** to win the title … GHC World heavyweight champion **Kaito Kiyomiya** defeated **Kenoh** to retain … **Shinsuke Nakamura** defeated **The Great Muta**.
(01-01-23)

Stardom Dream Queendom 2 at Ryogoku Kokugikan: **Super Strong Stardom Machine** and **Super Strong Stardom Giant Machine** won the Stardom Rumble, last eliminating **Miyu Amasaki** … High Speed champion **AZM** defeated **Hikari Shimizu** to retain … **Hanan**, **Mayu Iwatani**, & **Momo Kohgo** defeated **Hazuki**, **Koguma**, & **Saya Iida** … **Mina Shirakawa** & **Unagi Sayaka** beat **Mai Sakurai** & **Thekla** … **Himeka** & **Maika** defeated **Ami Sourei** & **MIRAI** and **Natsuko Tora** & **Ruaka** in a three-way bout … **KAIRI** wrestled **Utami Hayashishita** to a time-limit draw … **Hiragi Kurumi**, **Risa Sera**, & **Suzu Suzuki** defeated Artist of Stardom champions **Momo Watanabe**, **Saki Kashima**, & **Starlight Kid** in a hardcore match to win the title … **Nanae Takahashi** & **Yuu** beat Goddesses of Stardom champions **Natsupoi** & **Tam Nakano** to win the title … Wonder Of Stardom champion **Saya Kamitani** defeated **Haruka Umesaki** to retain … **Giulia** defeated World of Stardom champion **Syuri** to win the title.
(12-29-22)

tHIS iS NOt WRESTLEMANIA'S "gREATEST HITs"

GRAPPLERS, INSIDERS, FAMOUS FANS RECALL TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS FROM THE SPORT'S FLAGSHIP SHOW

• SECTION COMPILED BY AL CASTLE, CANDACE CORDELIA, KEVIN McELVANEY, AND PAUL E. PRATT •

AS WE BEGAN working in earnest on this section, WWE was undergoing a sea change. Vincent K. McMahon had just resumed his position at the head of the company's board of directors, and daughter Stephanie quickly resigned from her position as co-CEO. Rumors swirled about a potential sale of the company, with some analysts expressing concern about where all this might leave the industry leader a year or two from now. Surely, WrestleMania seemed to be the last thing on the minds of many close observers. *And yet ….*

The annual springtime extravaganza has become almost synonymous with the former World Wrestling Federation, as it has expanded its influence across the globe as a juggernaut of sports and entertainment. Whatever happens in 2023—or in the years ahead—WrestleMania has forever shaped the industry in countless ways.

Nearly forty years removed from the inaugural WWE supershow, now seems as good a time as ever to look back upon some of the more transformative 'Mania moments, with a close eye on how those moments have influenced the wrestling business (and community) in those ensuing years.

To help, we've tagged in various individuals, including active wrestlers, industry analysts, and even a couple of celebs with an affinity for the sport of professional wrestling.

THE PARTICIPANTS

DREW McINTYRE (2x WWE champion)
CARMELO HAYES (2x NXT North American champ)

AC MACK (Former IWTV World champion)
HAZUKI (Stardom)
LADY FROST (CMLL, formerly IMPACT)
COLBY CORINO (NWA)
POLLO DEL MAR (NWA)

DAVID LaGRECA (Busted Open Radio host)
EMILY MAE HELLER (Producer & broadcast journalist)

LARS FREDERIKSEN (Musician, podcaster)
OPEN MIKE EAGLE (Musician, podcaster)

Rather than focus on an all-time "greatest hits" of WrestleManias past—as we've done previously in this publication—we encouraged the folks listed above to reflect on moments with significance to them.

Although we didn't originally set out to do so, this section deals quite predominantly in 'Mania moments from the last 25 years. Call it recency bias, if you must, or a reflection of the ages of those involved (none of whom are old enough to collect Social Security). We prefer an alternate explanation: Maybe, during such a transformative era for the industry, it simply makes the most sense that our experts had WWE's more recent history on their minds.

GENERATIONS COLLIDE: ROCK VS. HOGAN

• WRESTLEMANIA 18 (2002) •

ASK TWO CURRENT WWE wrestlers why the clash between The Rock and Hulk Hogan stands out as an all-time great memorable WrestleMania moment, and you might expect them to primarily talk about the performance of their fellow wrestlers. In fact, both Drew McIntyre and Carmelo Hayes were more struck by the performances of those *outside* the ring.

"If you turn the volume down for that match, it isn't the greatest match," McIntyre said in a recent interview. "But, with the volume on, that's what this industry is all about. It's the emotion from the crowd."

More than two decades after "The Immortal One" and "The Great One" did battle at 2002's WrestleMania 18, the enduring image of the epic match is not an image at all. Rather, it is a sound—the deafening and sustained roar of 68,000 fans inside Toronto, Canada's SkyDome.

"I watched it back a couple months ago, and I remember just saying, 'Wow,'" added Hayes. "The crowd was so invested. And [Hogan and The Rock] weren't doing anything crazy."

Hayes was only seven years old when he first saw clips of the epic showdown on WWE television. Although he wasn't alive when Hulkamania first ran wild in WWE—more than a decade earlier—the future two-time NXT North American champion could sense, even then, that he was witnessing something special.

"I just remember it getting played over and over," Hayes recalled. "I didn't understand how big Hulk Hogan was and how big The Rock was. I didn't understand. I just knew it was a captivating moment."

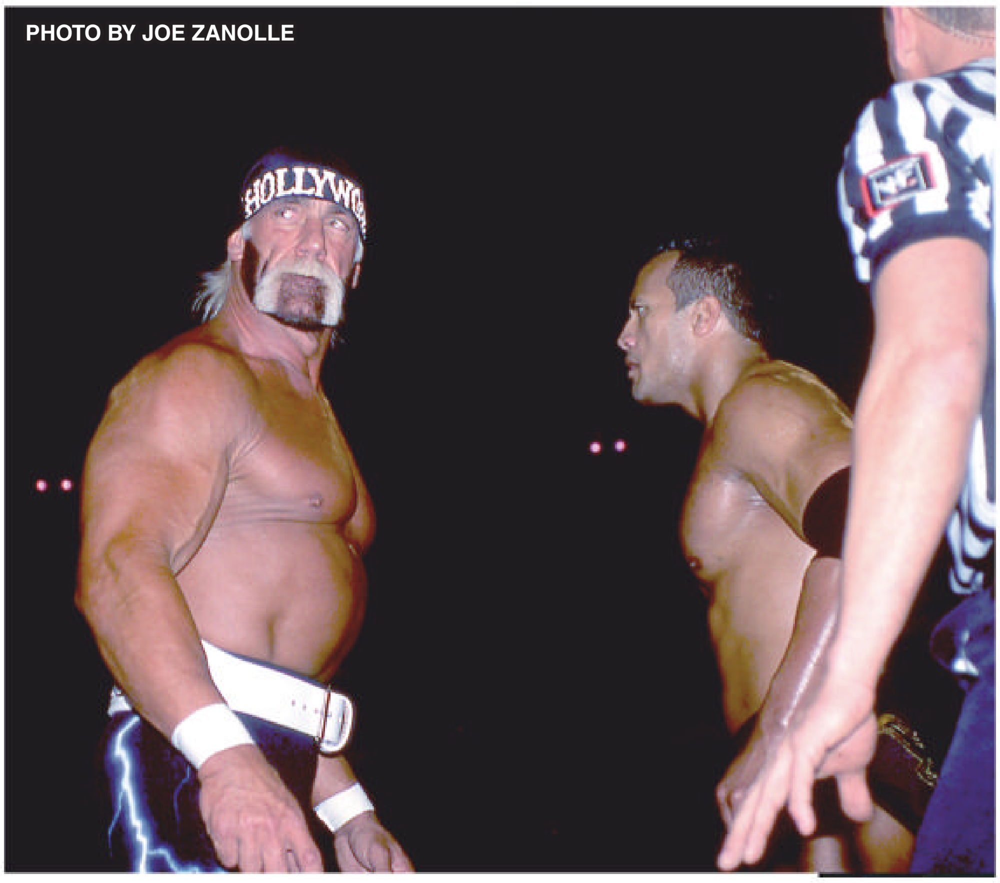
PHOTO BY JOE ZANOLLE

And it's a safe bet that even those in WWE didn't understand fully what they had in Rock vs. Hogan, including the participants themselves. Although it was apparent that the match sold more tickets than any other on the 12-bout card, it was not billed as the main event … and did not go on last. That unenviable position went to Chris Jericho and Triple H, who competed over the Undisputed World championship in a match that, relatively speaking, played before chirping crickets.

Although Hogan vs. Rock was promoted as "Icon Vs. Icon," WWE matchmakers could not fully grasp the dynamics at play in the generational dream match. Before the two men even made contact, the battle already had the makings of a WrestleMania classic.

"A lot of people's initial reaction is, 'I love this match.' But no. That's not what it's about. In this industry, it's about the moments," McIntyre said. "So, for me, right away, I think about Rock and Hogan, face-to-face."

They gazed at each other. The fans gazed at them. And they gazed at the fans. For nearly two full minutes, the massive stadium trembled as everyone inside it soaked in the moment.

Although Hogan was playing the role of the sinister head of the invading New World Order, fans in Toronto—and around the world—saw past the black and white, and instead envisioned the red and yellow that was synonymous with the World Wrestling Federation (and the WrestleMania brand) for so many years.

The last time Hogan had wrestled in the fabled SkyDome was in 1990, in another WrestleMania bout that was billed as a passing of the torch from The Hulkster to wrestling's next big star: The Ultimate Warrior. A dozen years later, it seemed that torch was still firmly in the hands of the man who'd carried it in the 1980s.

"To watch the crowd react the way they did to Hogan was probably unexpected, or maybe a little expected. He was supposed to be the bad guy, but was getting wildly cheered," remembered McIntyre, who was 16 at the time and just breaking into the sport. "People suddenly became kids again. They were Hulkamaniacs once again."

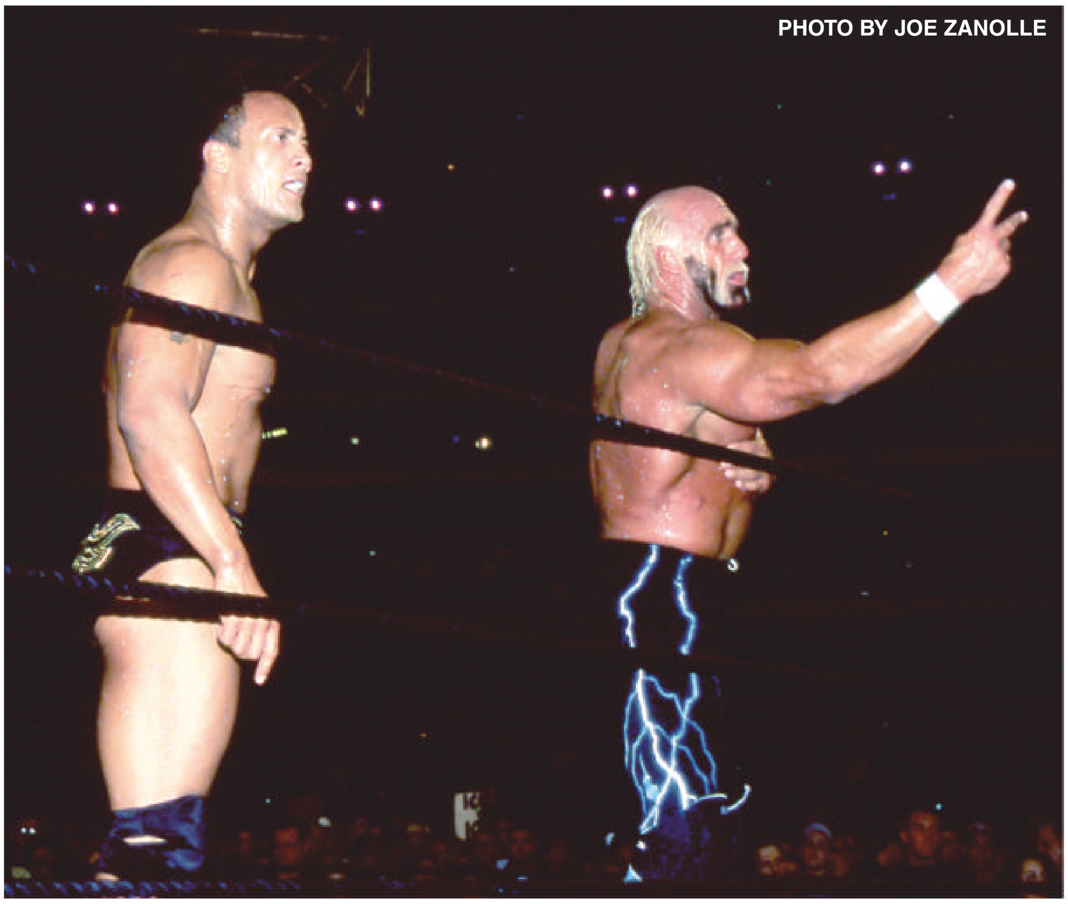

PHOTO BY JOE ZANOLLE

The hero's welcome received by Hogan not only caught WWE's brain trust by surprise, it also threw a bit of a monkey wrench into the layout of the match. Fans didn't want to see Hogan work the match as a bad guy. But The Rock was riding a wave of popularity that arguably hadn't been seen since, well … Hogan. What to do?

"The people were just so overwhelmed in the crowd, that it seemed like things might have changed. The rules flipped in the match," McIntyre observed. "You had two professionals in there that knew what they were doing. They put on an absolute master class."

As both Rock and Hogan have told it, the two legends scrapped whatever blueprint they may have prepared for the match and called upon their instincts as wrestling megastars. Hogan leaned into the fans' nostalgia—flexing his 24-inch pythons upon shoving The Rock to the ground, and later "Hulking Up" as he fought back from a Rock onslaught.

The Rock pivoted as well, taking exaggerated bumps that fans hadn't seen since his days playing the rule-breaking foil to "Stone Cold" Steve Austin. As he had admonished so many others to do over the years, The Rock *knew his role.*

"I've watched it back probably two or three times since I've been with the company, and I appreciate the level of showmanship, and also, on top of that, professionalism between the two," Hayes said.

In the end, The Rock got the win, and Hogan, once again, went through the motions of passing the proverbial torch to wrestling's new top star. One month later, Hogan—back in the red and yellow—would win the undisputed championship from Triple H.

The first encounter between Rock and Hogan would go on to be voted the 2002 Match of the Year by *PWI* readers, even though *The Wrestling Observer's* Dave Meltzer awarded it just three stars. Those who fully appreciate the battle of "Icon Vs. Icon" know that it shouldn't be measured in stars, but, rather, decibels.

"The closest thing I've ever had was at Clash at the Castle last year, when I walked out and went, 'Oh, my goodness. This is insane. I've never felt anything like this.' I can only imagine how those guys felt on that night," McIntyre pondered. "I can't imagine being there live, but you could feel it right through the screen."

THE GREATEST LADDER MATCH: SHAWN MICHAELS VS. RAZOR RAMON

• WRESTLEMANIA 10 (1994) •

FROM THE CLASSIC battle royal to the tried-and-true Falls Count Anywhere fight, each match stipulation can be elevated due to a magical blend of timing, the wrestlers involved, and circumstantial storylines. In the case of Shawn Michaels versus Razor Ramon at WrestleMania 10 for the Undisputed Intercontinental Championship, WWE's inaugural five-star-ranked bout also became the first ladder match in the sport's history to show the stipulation belonged on the biggest stage.

Busted Open Radio host David LaGreca was among the Madison Square Garden audience at 'Mania 10, and he remembers Michaels and Ramon's genre-busting ladder match as the one that "stole the show."

"When that match was over and everybody was leaving the Garden, that was the match that everybody was talking about," LaGreca began. "That match itself, most people probably remember it as being the main event, 'cause that's the match that most people were talking about once that show was over."

LaGreca says he recalled hearing about ladder matches prior to WM 10—and seeing a considerable number of high-risk scaffold matches while watching the NWA. But Michaels vs. Ramon at WrestleMania 10 was a pivotal moment for WWE fans, particularly when it came to HBK's cachet as a professional wrestler. "It really, to me, started Shawn Michaels' career in a completely different plateau," adds LaGeca. "That match really started the talk of him being 'Mr. WrestleMania.'"

For new generations of wrestlers, including Carmelo Hayes, "Mr. WrestleMania's" career-altering moment was both awe-inspiring and inspirational. With customized gear, Hayes paid tribute to both Michaels and Ramon (the late Scott Hall) while defending the NXT North American title in a ladder match at NXT Stand and Deliver 2022.

"I used the same style that Shawn had, and then I put the razor on my kneepad, and it was about a month after Razor passed away," said Hayes. "Some people caught it, but some people didn't."

Hayes' acknowledgement of Scott Hall at Stand and Deliver is significant in several ways, but it bears importance to recognize Ramon as the winner of his WrestleMania bout with Michaels. In a *WWE Playback* episode featuring himself and Michaels, Hall points out two photos from their

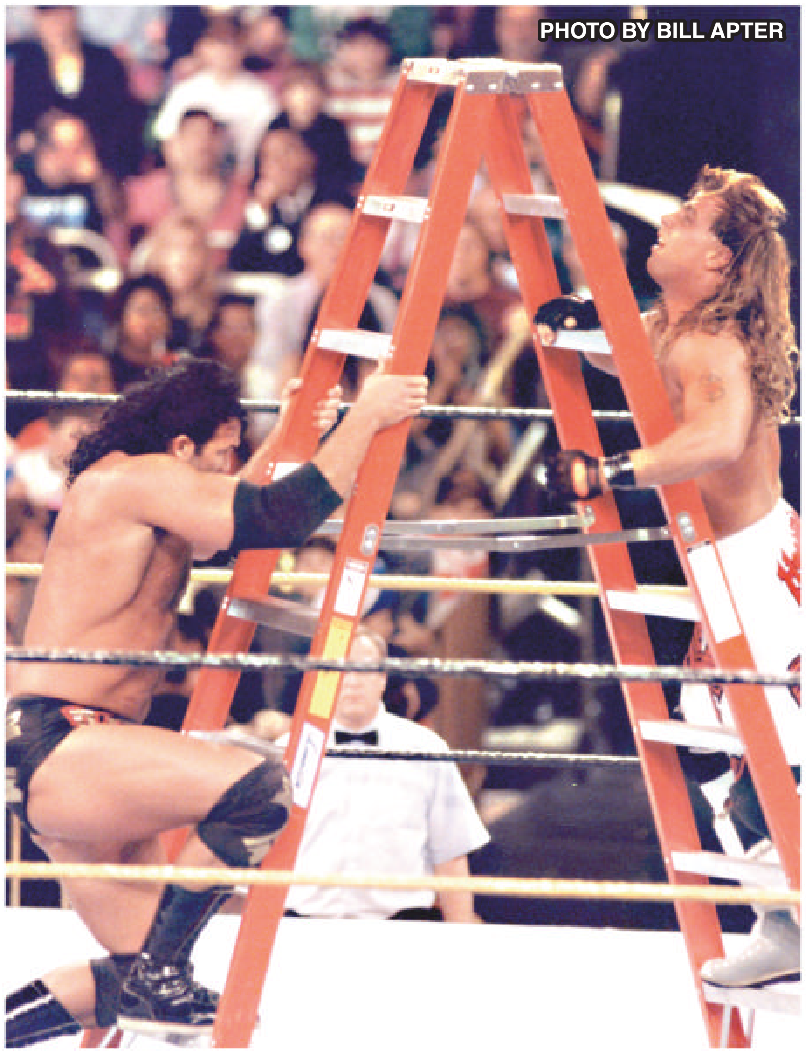
PHOTO BY BILL APTER

PHOTO BY BILL APTER

WM 10 classic—one of his opponent splashing him, and the other of himself holding both Intercontinental title belts on top of the single ladder used throughout the match.

Hall tells Shawn during the clip how he'd sign pictures of HBK extended in the air, mid-splash, at conventions, reminding fans that, in fact, he was the one who claimed the winner's purse. But, for many, Razor Ramon's WrestleMania 10 match with Shawn Michaels was unforgettable. Both wrestlers were winners in divergent ways: Razor clinched the honor of being the Undisputed Intercontinental champ, while Shawn won the unofficial title of "Mr. WrestleMania."

Both superstars gave unprecedented performances, and the concept of the ladder match was raised to an impossible standard—one that can be difficult to follow, even to this day.

"A lot of people probably look back at that match thinking Shawn Michaels won," said Dave LaGreca. "Obviously, he didn't. But he stole the show. The match stole the show. Now, you have to outperform somebody like Shawn Michaels. And I think he showed that [for] another 15 to 20 years, even, after that match … that there is nobody who could outperform Shawn Michaels."

Also worth noting: Shawn Michaels and Razor Ramon's WrestleMania 10 bout involved the use of only one ladder. *One.* Many younger wrestling fans are most familiar with seeing multiple ladders of different sizes on WWE television and at live events. Carmelo Hayes says he remains dazzled by Shawn and Razor's literal fight to the top of the only ladder they were given.

"I've even talked to Shawn about it," Hayes told *PWI*. "He said, 'Yeah, if that ladder went out, we were screwed.' There was no way around it. I don't think people took that into account back then."

On top of the limited hardware, the two athletes had very little precedent on how to navigate a ladder match of this caliber. They were, indeed, the first to ever do it at this level. "You have no blueprint. There is no blueprint on how to do this ladder match," said Hayes. "I was very impressed with the fact that they were able to pull off all the things they were able to pull off, and really create history."

The unmistakable tension, a gripping storyline between two marquee wrestlers, and two Intercontinental titles on the line, all coalesced into one high-stakes WrestleMania 10 match, which some deem as the greatest ladder match of all-time. It wasn't the main event of the night (the WWF championship match between Yokozuna and Bret Hart holds that distinction). It's the ladder match that *didn't* end all ladder matches, but, rather, opened up unimaginable possibilities. "That match is the foundation of everything that came after it," summarized LaGreca. "There are people that have been able to improve on it. But the foundation will always be the ladder match at WrestleMania 10."

Perhaps, in the future, we'll witness another historic, transformative ladder match like the WrestleMania 10 encounter between Razor Ramon and Shawn Michaels—maybe even one between Carmelo Hayes and another HBK-esque figure on the WWE roster … one who is no stranger to winning noteworthy ladder matches.

"I just feel in my soul that I'm gonna wrestle Seth Rollins at WrestleMania," said Hayes. "I feel like that's a big WrestleMania match waiting to happen. I look at Seth, as far as in-ring performers, one of the best right now. I'd love to test my skills against his skills on the biggest stage of them all."

Dave LaGreca, for one, would like to see it. And he sees 2024 as the year Hayes could get his own 'Mania moment. "I would love it!" he said. "I'm a big fan of Carmelo Hayes … he listens to *Busted Open* … he's a sponge. He's still a student of pro wrestling. He wants to learn as much as possible. So, [it's great] that you have somebody that's a big star on the NXT brand that knows there's still so much more to learn."

LaGreca speaks even more highly of a certain ex-Shield "Architect." "Seth Rollins is one of the greatest pro wrestlers right now," he said. "I think he kind of gets overlooked because he's in the WWE, and I think a lot of people look at New Japan, AEW … but Seth Rollins is one of the best out there. He's been doing it at a high level for a very long time, and he still has more years to come."

Ladder or not, a Hayes vs. Rollins battle at WrestleMania 40 has 2024 Match of the Year potential. However, we have all of 2023 to celebrate the ladder matches that await us before then, even as we continue to remember the "Granddaddy Of Them All."

THE STREAK, SILENCED: UNDERTAKER vs. BROCK LESNAR

• WRESTLEMANIA 30 (2014) •

ON PAPER, THE card for WrestleMania 30 reads like a can't-miss spectacle for the ages: Daniel Bryan vs. Triple H (with a main-event title shot up for grabs); Cesaro vs. Big Show; John Cena vs. Bray Wyatt; and the Vickie Guerrero Divas Championship Invitational, featuring AJ Lee against 13 fellow Divas. New Orleans' Superdome brimmed to the rafters with tens of thousands of WWE fans waiting for their favorite wrestlers to win big.

Yet, those same fans couldn't anticipate the biggest surprise of the evening—The Undertaker's 21-match WrestleMania victory streak being decimated by "The Beast Incarnate" Brock Lesnar.

Just about everybody projected 'Taker to win against Lesnar at WrestleMania 30. At the time, the former's winning streak seemed too impenetrable to break. Across 21 WrestleManias, the likes of Ric Flair, Triple H, Shawn Michaels, Randy Orton, Mark Henry, Batista, Kane, Edge, CM Punk, and more fell victim to The Undertaker. The "anything can happen" atmosphere of WWE did not prepare the legions of viewers in the Superdome—and countless more watching via their televisions—for Lesnar's signature F-5 to take down the legend.

NWA standout Colby Corino's first live WrestleMania experience happened to be that night at the Superdome, and he regards Brock Lesnar's defeat of The Undertaker as his "most memorable WrestleMania moment." The exhilarating climate, bookmarked by the incomprehensible ending of Lesnar and Undertaker's match, was unearthly.

Corino recalls the energy among the thousands of fans in attendance. "Being around that many people all watching one thing, even these people who look like little ants standing in a little box or whatever it was from that far up, it was just such an atmosphere," he said. "Everything was loud, everything was hot, except for when Brock beat 'Taker … because no one was expecting it."

Fifteen years into his own career, having collected numerous independent titles along the East Coast, Corino still feels the shock. "No one thought that Brock Lesnar was gonna win," he recollected. "As soon as he gave him that last F-5, 1-2-3, the whole arena, 80 to 90,000 people, just went silent. I've never heard anything like it. It was insane the amount of people that were there that just all went quiet."

Busted Open Radio's David LaGreca was also at the Superdome for WrestleMania 30. He vividly remembers how hushed the stadium became after Lesnar's shock win. "You could hear a pin drop in that building," he told *PWI*. "Everybody's jaws just dropped. I don't think anybody really comprehended it until they actually saw in front of their face. It was a very, very surreal moment. The silence was deafening that night."

Nine years later, Lesnar's undoing of The Undertaker's fabled WrestleMania streak remains arguably the biggest match upset in the event's history. Decades from now, fans and wrestling pundits will likely continue to dissect the events leading up to Lesnar's unexpected triumph in New Orleans and wonder what could have been.

"I still think it was the wrong decision," said LaGreca. "I still feel that Undertaker should have retired undefeated at WrestleMania. I don't think Brock Lesnar needed to beat The Undertaker."

And yet, he *did* beat Undertaker. In a long list of WWE accomplishments, that one moment may stand out as the premier achievement of Lesnar's career—not only ending the streak, but proving that "The Dead Man" was human … even on the WrestleMania stage.

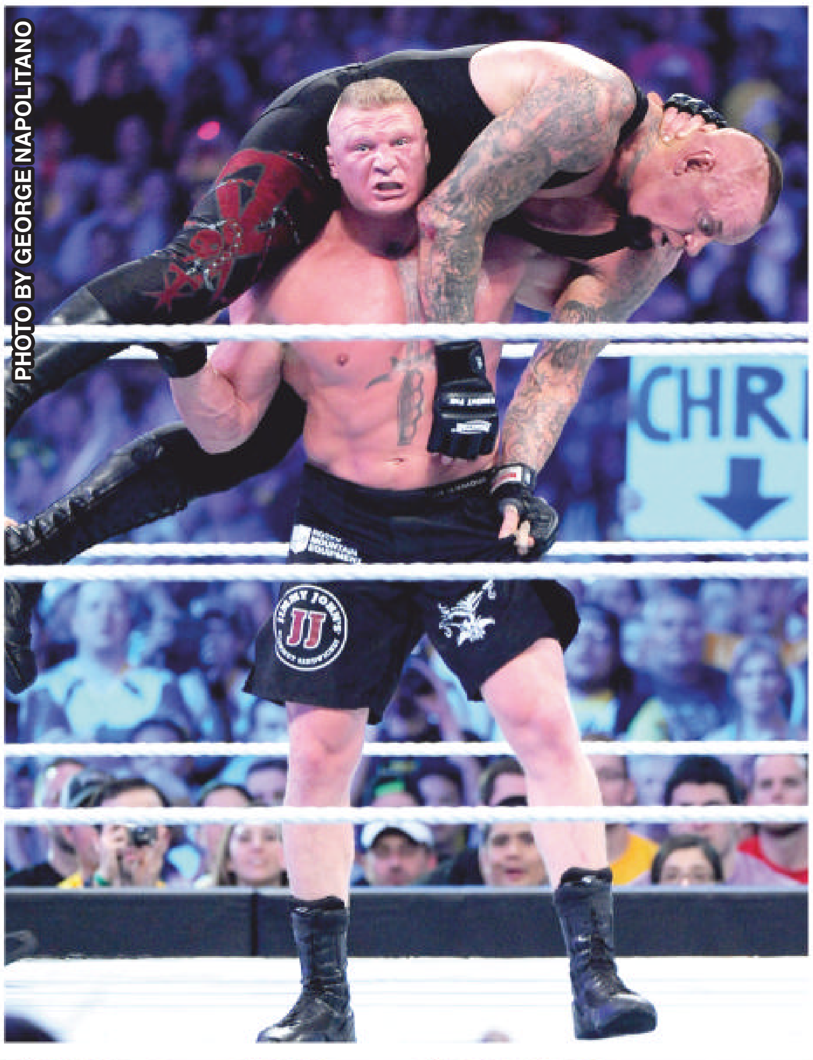

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

THE FINAL CHAPTER: AUSTIN vs. ROCK

• WRESTLEMANIA 19 (2003) •

HOW DO YOU close out one of the most pivotal rivalries in wrestling history? With the rubber match to end all rubber matches!

In what, we'd later learn, would be "Stone Cold" Steve Austin's final match for almost two decades, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson finally had the opportunity to avenge his losses at WrestleManias 15 and 17. Though the 'Mania 17 bout, with its infamous double-turn finish, tends to get most of the glory, former IWTV World champion AC Mack insists that the final chapter of this story was one that needed to be written.

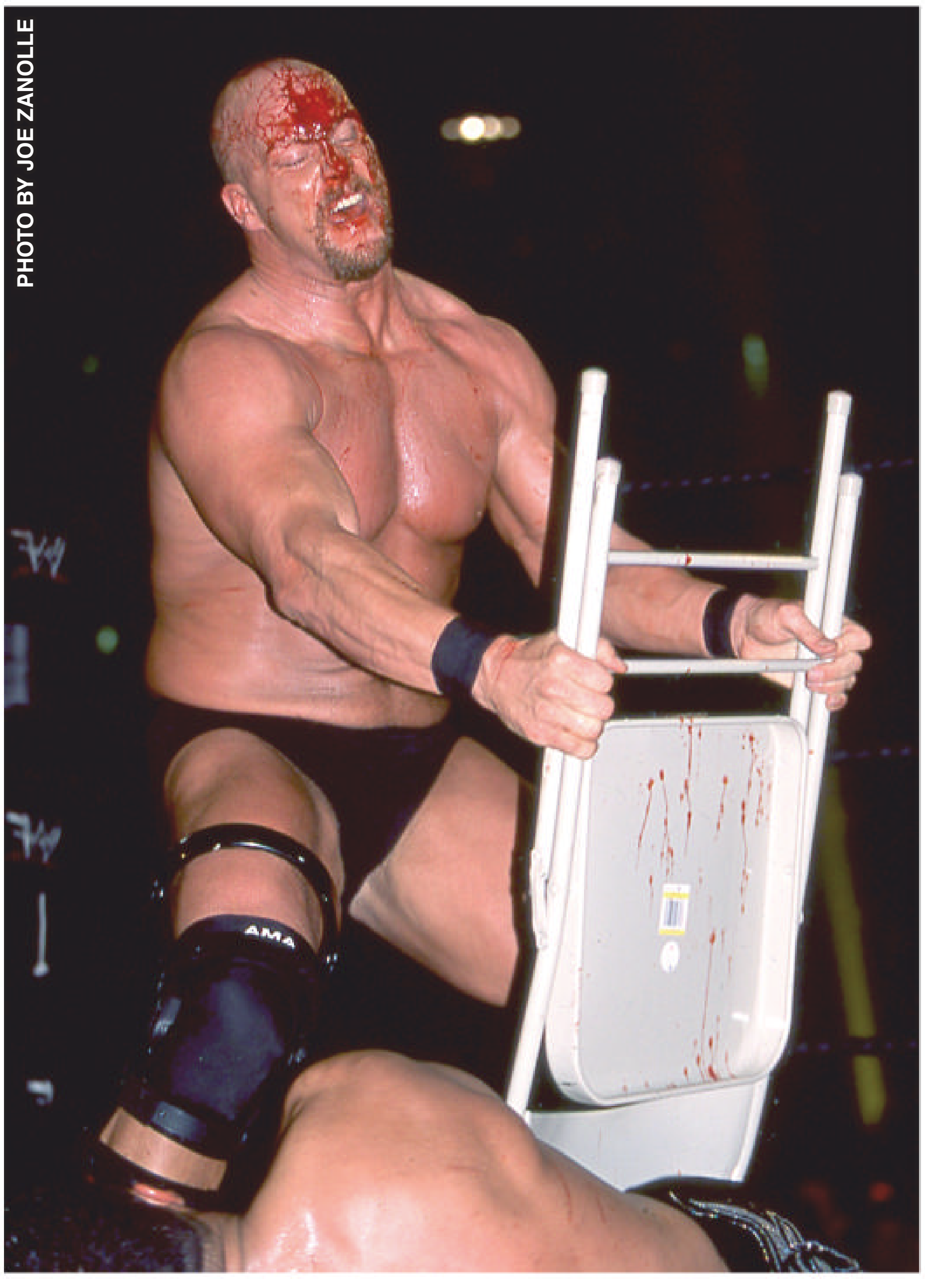
PHOTO BY JOE ZANOLLE

"I'm biased, and my favorite wrestler of all-time is The Rock. So, I love that he was finally able to beat 'Stone Cold' at WrestleMania," said Mack. "This was also assumed … and, I mean, until this year, was his last match ever. So, it was the time for that to happen. And for The Rock to get his win. And not just any Rock … it was Hollywood Rock. That's my personal favorite version of The Rock. So, it just all kind of played out perfectly, at least for me as a fan."

Still, Mack will admit that part two of the Rock-Austin trilogy was the more iconic bout. That opinion is shared by rapper "Open" Mike Eagle, who, in addition to his work in music and on television, has also been known to sit in the podcasting chair and share his takes on pro wrestling. "They felt like they were the most over ever. At that time, like, just like the two giant titans: the people that defined that era of wrestling," he said, noting that the vaunted WM 17 fight coincided with a period in his fandom when he was learning more about the inner workings of the sport.

But the match wasn't perfect. "They did things that worked against them. They looked like they wanted to do an Austin heel turn on the level of a Hogan heel turn," said Eagle. "It's just so hard to make people hate him. Especially in Texas, it seems like a bad idea to try to book an Austin heel turn … in Austin's hometown, and a no-DQ match."

Predictably, the crowd did not respond as intended. But WrestleMania 19? Well … in many ways, that was the perfect sendoff. "I don't think you could have done any better, ending it that way," said AC Mack. "Especially with all the backstage drama with 'Stone Cold,' having to be rushed to the hospital or hurt or whatever the case was. He had to go to the emergency room. He made it back for the match. But, if you watch him during his entrance, knowing what you know now, he's space-eyed. But he got through the match, he didn't seem off. All of that, to me, makes for more of a dramatic and good ending."

LESNAR VS. ANGLE: CLASSIC BOUT, HARROWING ENDING

• WRESTLEMANIA 19 (2003) •

AS JIM ROSS is so fond of saying about pro wrestling: "It ain't ballet." Things can and do go wrong in the squared circle. And those mistakes can range from the slight and nearly imperceptible to the potentially catastrophic.

Ask most fans about the WrestleMania 19 main event, which saw Brock Lesnar challenge Kurt Angle for the WWE World title, and their first comment will likely be about the match's downright scary final moments.

Lesnar, who had previously performed the move with some regularity while with Ohio Valley Wrestling, attempted to put away the champ with a massive shooting star press. Perhaps misjudging the distance between himself and Angle, "The Beast" didn't quite complete the rotation, causing his head to connect hard with the mat. With Lesnar not seriously hurt, he and Angle were able to finish the match, with the challenger using a second F-5 to take home the WWE championship.

Lars Frederiksen—member of the band Rancid ("Ruby Soho"), cohost of *The Wrestling Perspective Podcast*, and lifelong reader of *PWI*—was there in person at Seattle's Safeco Field. "It took the air out of the building," he recalled. "I feel like Kurt was a little bit further out than he should have been. But I feel like, also, if Kurt was actually further in, [Lesnar's] neck would have broke."

Terrifying moment aside, Frederiksen thinks the match is an overlooked classic. "Straight up. And I feel like those guys took each other to a whole different level," he told *PWI*. "People always remember, like, the 'botched' move where he almost dies at the end, which sucks about that match. Because, you know, the only way for him to win is to do that thing that nobody's really seen. But it has to be the spectacular moment, right? I mean, that's what WrestleMania is all about."

In other words, Lesnar had a good reason to go for the high-risk maneuver. "The story was being told. It was so good," said Frederiksen. "It was unbelievable. You know, those two guys hooked you emotionally."

Thankfully, both champ and challenger left the match relatively unscathed, living to fight (and keep fans on the hook) for years to come.

BELAIR VS. BANKS: DESTROYING THE GLASS CEILING

• WRESTLEMANIA 37 (2021) •

AS A WOMAN working her own way through a business that has long been kinder to men, former NWA/IMPACT and current CMLL standout Lady Frost cites the world title bout between Bianca Belair and Sasha Banks—the first 'Mania main event featuring two Black women—as one without parallel.

"I think, even if you didn't watch wrestling, you felt the magnitude of what that symbolized and what that meant, and the progress and the intensity and the history," Frost said. "And it's a moment that I felt like I went somewhere very real, because it *was* real. It wasn't, you know, two characters. You had two Black women, main-eventing, standing across from each other … I felt like it transcended just a wrestling match, which it did. It was more than just a match. But it was a moment that, like, I was teary-eyed. We were out at a restaurant, or wherever we were watching it, and I was at the table tearing up."

Frost, who can't always catch such moments live while on the road and working, was particularly grateful to be able to tune in that night. "I think, especially when you're making history, and you know that everyone's gonna look back on that moment, the pressure is even greater," she said. "Because it's not just like, hey, we have to perform for tonight, we have to perform for all of these moments for the rest of [time]. This match is going to be compared against so many in the future. I feel like, because it was the first of its kind, everyone's always going to compare. So, pressure is always greater, and they leveled up. They did a great job. It was incredible."

I'M SORRY, I LOVE YOU: HBK RETIRES FLAIR

• WRESTLEMANIA 24 (2008) •

"THIS MATCH, FOR me, it's therapeutic," said Open Mike Eagle, of the fateful contest when Shawn Michaels would end Ric Flair's career following history's most devastating superkick. "I have problems dealing with my emotions sometimes. This match, I can put it on, and be in my feelings in like 10 minutes. I'm saying it's better than any medicine. One of the things wrestling does so well is it takes real emotions from people and puts it in a situation where we can be fully invested. We know these are worked contests. But we love Ric Flair. Right? And we know that HBK is one of the all-time greatest, and we know that they have respect for each other. And we know that Ric Flair is giving Shawn Michaels the privilege of having his last match. He's been ducking superkicks this whole match, and Michaels goes into the corner and starts tuning up the band. And they get that shot of him saying, was it, 'I love you, I'm sorry'? And then kicking his head off. I mean, as Ric Flair is on his knees saying, 'Come here, come do it. Put me out of my misery.' Right. And then, gosh, you know, when he's kind of falling on him, and Flair's crying while he's being pinned, and his family's all around ringside. It's just truly, truly one of the best displays of how to use real emotion in a wrestling match that I've ever seen."

BELLAS VS. AJ LEE & PAIGE: TWO ERAS COLLIDE

• WRESTLEMANIA 31 (2015) •

THE ALL-WOMEN main event of WrestleMania 35 was truly historic, as it represented a shift in how WWE positioned its female superstars. With all due respect to the women of the (R)Evolution era, it's worth shouting out the accomplishments of the roster members who brought in new fans during the so-called "Divas Era."

Consider The Bella Twins, whose TV reality programs made the historically macho world of wrestling seem a little more approachable for countless viewers. Then, there was someone like Barbie Blank (Kelly Kelly), whose bright personality and athletic abilities endeared her to numerous current grapplers—including IPW New Zealand Women's champ Candy Lee and multi-time Stardom tag titlist Hazuki.

"Japanese pro wrestling and the Divas era have different fighting styles, but I'm glad I fell in love with WWE and fell in love with the Divas division," Hazuki told *PWI*. "Without it, I wouldn't be who I am today."

Emily Mae Heller is an onscreen host, broadcast journalist, and producer for various promotions. Her first WrestleMania experience was in 2015, which featured numerous exciting matches alongside the underappreciated bout that saw the Bellas take on the new guard in the Women's division, Paige (Saraya) and AJ Lee.

"This shift was pivotal, as Charlotte, Becky (Lynch), Sasha (Banks) were ascending to the top of the NXT Women's division, and, as announced a few months later, would be joining the main roster," said Heller, who adds that the bout was also Paige's 'Mania debut. "Almost one year later, the Divas championship was replaced with the Raw Women's championship, and the term 'Diva' was phased out after this."

Very few would argue that WWE's "Women's Evolution" wasn't an improvement over what came before, between increased TV time and focus on in-ring matches over tired (often sexist) tropes. But it's also worth mentioning that the Divas were working incredibly hard to learn their craft and overcome low expectations while also forming lasting bonds with the WWE fan base. Plus, there is an entire generation of fans—including many women and LGBTQ+ viewers—who quite liked that presentation for various reasons. As they say, variety is the spice of life.

"Professional wrestling is interesting because there are various fighting styles," said Hazuki. "And, when I became a pro wrestler, I realized that even more."

Ultimately, the WrestleMania 31 women's tag match marked the beginning of something truly special. "After WrestleMania 31, we had three out of the four pillars of the Women's division fighting for the Women's title at WrestleMania 32. as a major match," reflects Heller. "Charlotte, Becky, Sasha changed the game for women at WrestleMania 32. This moment solidified, or helped get a step closer to, women being on the same footing as men's matches. And all of this wouldn't have happened without WrestleMania 31."

QUIET CELEBRATION:

DREW McINTYRE BEATS BROCK LESNAR

• WRESTLEMANIA 36 (2020) •

DREW McINTYRE HAS the unique distinction of having experienced his favorite WrestleMania moment both as a wrestler and as a fan watching from home.

After winning the 2020 Royal Rumble, McIntyre was on course to challenge Brock Lesnar for the WWE championship in front of 65,000 fans at Tampa, Florida's Raymond James Stadium in the main event of WrestleMania 36. But the COVID-19 outbreak forced WWE to radically alter its plans, and instead hold the big event in its tiny Performance Center in Orlando—without any fans in attendance.

McIntyre was doing promotional work for the event in his native Scotland, when he was summoned to rush back to the States. "Initially, it was a bummer … and anger. It was like, *What the hell?* I had worked for so long. To hear 'Mania might be canceled. To hear everything might be shutting down … I was like, *Come on. You've got to be kidding me*," McIntyre recalled. "But once I had a chance to sit down and think about things, watch the news, understand the gravity of the situation, and know that we were the only original content in sports and entertainment at the time, my attitude changed. I almost felt guilty and selfish for feeling how I felt before. I knew that we could really make a difference."

McIntyre got into lemonade-making mode. Though there would be no fans to cheer him on in person, he sought to put on the kind of performance he would give in front of a packed stadium.

McIntyre withstood three F-5s from "The Beast" and responded with four Claymore kicks—the last of which got the job done. The inaugural two-night WrestleMania closed with the image of "The Scottish Warrior" celebrating with his newly won WWE championship belt. The only sound to be heard was the bagpipes of McIntyre's theme song.

"If you watch my Royal Rumble victory from a few months earlier, 40,000 people are going crazy. I'm dropping to my knees. The adrenaline is overwhelming. At WrestleMania, it's the opposite. Complete silence. 1-2-3, silence," McIntyre said. "I have the title in my hands, but the adrenaline is not flying like it was at the Royal Rumble. This time, it's a very clear moment. There's a montage going on in my head of everything that it's taken to get me to this point as WWE champion."

WWE lineage shows that McIntyre won the title on April 5, 2020. In truth, the match took place more than a week earlier, as the pandemic led to the company taping WrestleMania in advance over several days.

Though bizarre circumstances may have taken away some of the spontaneity of the event, they also gave McIntyre the unique opportunity to relive his championship victory from the comfort of his living room couch.

"The cool thing about it, as I'm watching it with the rest of the world, as the referee presents me with the title on TV, my wife presented me with the title at home, which meant even more to me," said McIntyre, who was also monitoring social media while enjoying the show as a fan. "It was so cool to see so much positivity for my win, and to know that, *Okay. I've got the ball right now* … I'm leading the charge. I'm going to make sure everybody's entertained during this time.'"

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"MACHO MAN" & ELIZABETH ... BUT WHAT ABOUT SHERRI?!

• WRESTLEMANIA 7 (1991) •

"**IT'S DISGUSTING HOW** fans overlook the *true* greats of professional wrestling," sneered Pollo Del Mar.

"But why should we expect any different?" asked the *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* columnist, a staple of National Wrestling Alliance programming alongside "The Thrillbilly" Silas Mason. "Wrestlers themselves cast those same greats aside with careless abandon!"

Her outburst comes amidst discussions of history's most enduring WrestleMania moments. Some potential topics pitched included Hulk Hogan bodyslamming Andre The Giant at WrestleMania 3, Shawn Michaels retiring "Nature Boy" Ric Flair at WrestleMania 24, and the like. Del Mar had something different in mind.

"This has everything to do with WrestleMania's most memorable moments!" she snapped. "Who could *possibly* forget the reunion of 'Macho Man' Randy Savage and Miss Elizabeth at WrestleMania 7? It's one of the most memorable moments in pro wrestling history!"

That is undeniable. March 24, 1991: Former WWF World champions The Ultimate Warrior and Savage engaged in a grueling 20-minute encounter with the latter's career on the line. Despite "Sensational Queen" Sherri Martel's best efforts, Warrior forced "Macho Man" into early retirement.

Post-match, Martel attacked the downtrodden Savage. Distraught about the betrayal, his former manager—an obviously conflicted Elizabeth—ran to the ring, throwing the former WWF Women's champion aside to defend her estranged man.

What followed remains magical. By hoisting Elizabeth to his shoulder, Savage instantly mended an on-screen relationship once so beloved by fans worldwide. All transgressions suddenly forgotten, WWF announcers proclaimed, "She loves 'The Macho Man,' she has *always* loved 'The Macho Man'!"

"Grown adults around the globe were *sobbing*," asserted Del Mar, her heavily made-up face contorting into a grimace. "Can you even imagine?!"

Quickly, it's apparent "The Manager Of Champions" isn't downplaying fans' emotional responses to the reunion—rather, Savage's decision-making skills.

"Can you imagine being so stupid, tossing aside a glorious woman—a true legend like Sherri—for that meek, boring, hapless tart Miss Elizabeth?!" With clear disdain, Del Mar continues, "How *very* dare you, Randy Savage?!"

In a boudoir filled with accolades and achievements celebrating her own storied career, Del Mar then reached onto a shelf of wrestling memorabilia. Past unopened Rick Rude and Goldust collectibles, from next to an autographed Bobby Eaton playing card, she lifted a "Queen" Sherri action figure.

"This gorgeous, fearless woman put her life on the line to save Randy's career," Del Mar proclaimed, her pitch approaching a screech. "While Elizabeth stood in the crowd, wringing her hands, crying like a worthless fan?!"

Del Mar began to look genuinely repulsed. "Sherri did *all* the work, was riveting at ringside," she lamented. "Somehow Elizabeth leaves with the man, the applause, and is the 'memorable' one? Absurd!"

PWI Contributing Writer Paul E. Pratt noted a "startling intensity" in Del Mar's eyes, as the manager made a case for Sherri to—at the very least—be remembered as a gamechanger alongside Elizabeth.

"Remember WrestleMania 7 however you choose," said Del Mar. "But I relish the moment Sherri Martel made clear she refused to be saddled with a loser!"

Of course, Sherri landed on her feet, managing Shawn Michaels ("a younger, hotter man") soon thereafter, with HBK fighting "The Model" Rick Martel for her affections at SummerSlam '92. Still.

"WrestleMania 7 proved Randy never deserved a true queen," said Del Mar. "And neither do despicable fans who consider Sherri Martel's greatness a mere footnote in wrestling's most saccharine love story!"

THE FORBIDDEN MANIA

21 MATCHES WE MAY NEVER SEE ON THE GRANDEST STAGE (BUT WE'D SURE LIKE TO!)

TEXT BY JASON McVEIGH

IF YOUR CHILDHOOD was anything like most of us at *PWI*, chances are you've spent some time—perhaps even as a younger reader of this magazine—with a pen and paper booking your own fantasy wrestling cards. And, when you were envisaging these dream bouts, you likely didn't see them taking place at your local high school gym. Far more likely, you pictured them under the bright lights of a spectacular event stage, very much like WrestleMania.

Well, truth be told, we are still partial to some fantasy booking. So, we got to thinking ... what would our dream WrestleMania look like? Sure, we could concoct a card full of quality matches between WWE contracted talent, but where's the fantasy fun in that? Instead, we decided to open the ultimate Forbidden Door and imagine what it would be like if, for one event only, any wrestler in the world could take to the "Grandest Stage Of Them All" and go head-to-head with WWE's best.

Our self-imposed rules for this undertaking were simple: Every match had to feature at least one current WWE wrestler, and the matches could not have happened before (or, at the very least, not in a major promotion). Aside from that, everything else was fair game.

Allowing for a generous 21-bout supercard—mercifully, spread across two nights like other contemporary WrestleManias—here are the unlikely dream matches we'd love to see at *The Forbidden Mania*.

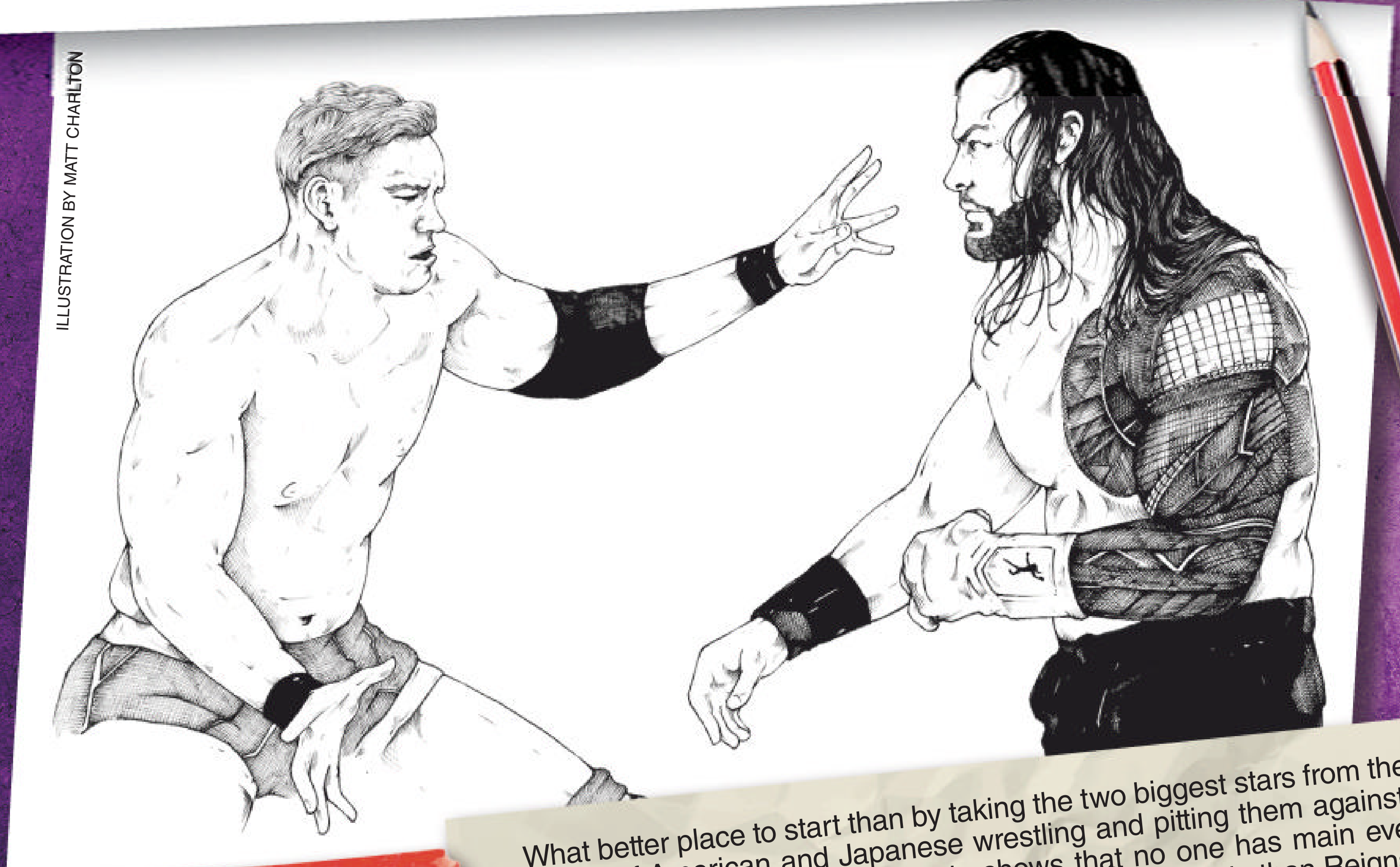

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT CHARLTON

ROMAN REIGNS VS. KAZUCHIKA OKADA

What better place to start than by taking the two biggest stars from the last 10 years of American and Japanese wrestling and pitting them against one another? A quick glance at the stats shows that no one has main evented WrestleMania or Wrestle Kingdom more in the past decade than Reigns and Okada have done, respectively. In other words, don't expect either man to be intimidated by the grandeur of this encounter. With Reigns' brute strength and Okada's world-famous resilience, this could make for a long and curious game of chess. We expect the win will go to whomever can outlast and outsmart his opponent long enough to hit that final spear or Rainmaker clothesline.

AJ STYLES VS. JOSH ALEXANDER

In what could be billed as a battle between the heart and soul of TNA and the heart and soul of modern-day IMPACT Wrestling, Styles vs. Alexander makes for an intriguing clash of styles (pardon the pun). Such a match might start off with some beautiful technical wrestling, before quickly giving way to a hard-hitting exchange of forearms to the jaw. Both prideful competitors, "The Phenomenal One" and "The Walking Weapon" will surely leave everything they have in the ring in pursuit of the "dub." Can Alexander ground the speedy Styles with his amateur wrestling credentials? We would love to find out.

COURTESY IMPACT WRESTLING/BASIL MAHMUD

PHOTO BY VERN VERNA

BECKY LYNCH VS. BRITT BAKER

We can practically hear the promo battles between these two already—and, frankly, we love it! With tongues as sharp as some of the dental equipment used by Dr. Baker, you can be sure that this one will become very personal, very quickly. But what of the match? No doubt, the experience factor favors Lynch; just don't discount just how clever (and underhanded) Baker is when trying to secure a win. We imagine that this one will see each woman trying to serve her opponent a slice of humble pie. Bluntly: That means making the other give up. Expect Baker to reach for her Lockjaw finisher and Lynch to attempt Dis-arm-her to try and get the final word.

BROCK LESNAR VS. KEITH LEE

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Based on the appetizer fans got when these two held court together during the 2020 Men's Royal Rumble match, a full course of "The Beast" vs. "The Limitless One" is sure to satiate the appetites of all who have been hungering for this collision. It's hard to forget the response of the crowd gathered at Minute Maid Park in Houston, Texas, on the night of their initial stare-down. Imagine, then, what the atmosphere would be for a full-blown tilt! Watch out for power moves aplenty and athleticism that defies the size of these men. It might not be an overly long or pretty match … but, for big-fight feel, it won't be touched.

CHARLOTTE FLAIR vs. MICKIE JAMES

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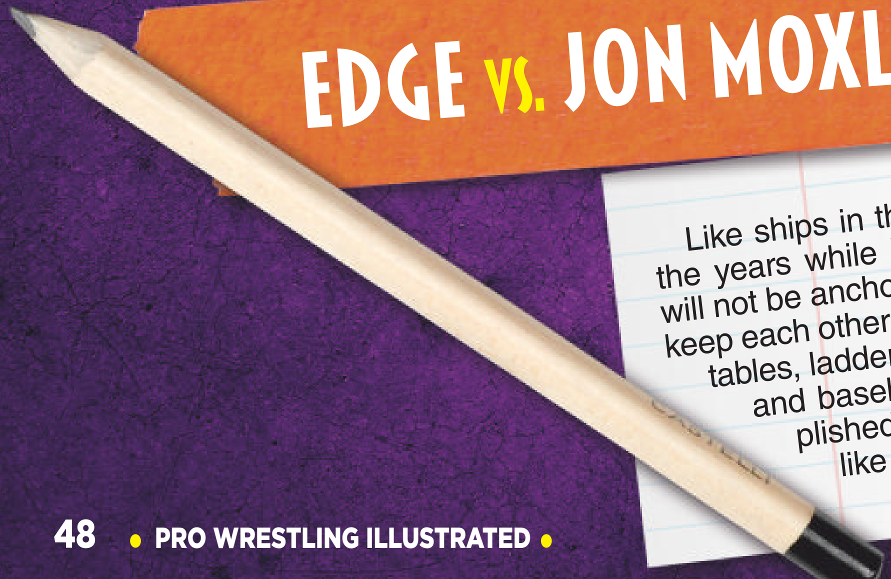
It feels almost criminal that two of the most decorated women in wrestling history never managed to have a singles match during their time in WWE. Given the veteran smarts of James and the nefarious nature of Flair, we're likely to see a bit of a cat-and-mouse game, as both stars feel each other out and try to capitalize on whatever weaknesses—and there aren't many—they can find. Knowing how seriously each athlete takes her craft, handing the other lady a loss would stand as a career highlight for either future hall-of-famer.

THE USOS vs. THE MOTOR CITY MACHINE GUNS (LADDER MATCH)

With one team comprised of brothers and another as close as brothers, it's difficult to say who has an advantage based on their cohesiveness. But that's what makes this contest such an intriguing one. Throw a ladder into the mix, however, and that's where things get really interesting. Expect big, double-team moves from both tandems and an accelerating level of danger as they attempt to outdo one another with the aid of various ladders. While not an obvious source of advantage in a tag team match, it could be Sabin and Shelley's experience in high-risk affairs like Ultimate X that pushes them out front here ... that is, assuming Solo Sikoa isn't lurking somewhere, waiting for the chance to help his kin.

EDGE vs. JON MOXLEY (LAST MAN STANDING MATCH)



Like ships in the night, Edge and Mox have sailed different courses over the years while building reputations as grizzled veterans who cannot and will not be anchored down. Accordingly, we figured a match where they try to keep each other down (at least for a 10-count) might be in order. Will there be tables, ladders, and chairs? Oh my, yes! Maybe some barbed wire, blood, and baseball bats, too … but don't be fooled. These two are accomplished technical wrestlers when they choose to be, and we would like to see some of that deployed here, as well.

RICOCHET VS. EL HIJO DEL VIKINGO VS. MISTICO (TRIPLE-THREAT MATCH)

We said the idea here would be bouts that aren't likely to happen. However, a contest involving wrestlers from AAA *and* CMLL makes this one super-duper unlikely, given the bitter feelings between Mexico's top promotions. Still, it's our show, and we will do what we want—which is precisely what the Smackdown star, AAA *wunderkind*, and original Sin Cara would do here. At various points, these three high-flyers have been accused of defying gravity. Why not remove gravity from the equation altogether and let them have at it? Keep an eye on the ropes in this one—especially around CMLL ace Mistico—because that's where the match will be won and lost.

NEW DAY VS. THE ELITE

Technically, it could be said that these top trios have clashed before. The initial battle happened in 2018. And, rather than in a ring, it took place at the E3 Gaming Convention in L.A., with each team fighting vicariously through *Street Fighter* video game characters. As much fun as that was to behold, you'll forgive us for wanting to see these six actually lock up within the squared circle. Kofi Kingston vs. Kenny Omega seems like a choice athletic match-up between former world champions. With respect to them, Xavier Woods, and the Young Bucks, the real X-factor here may be the power of Big E. If wielded properly, a fully healthy E could end up swinging the win for the WWE boys.

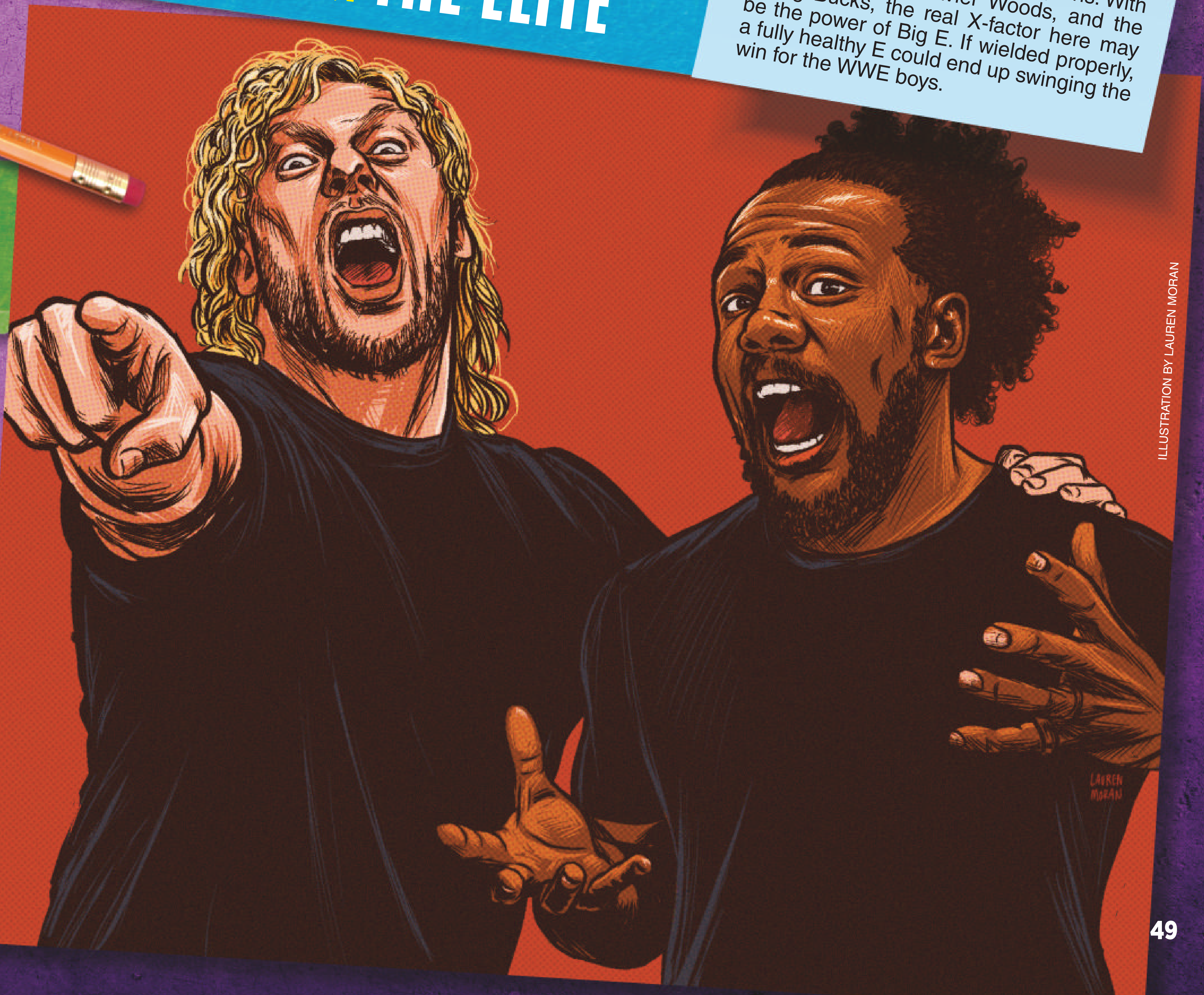


ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN MORAN

GUNTHER VS. JACOB FATU

It's the longest-tenured MLW World champion of all-time (and cousin of The Bloodline) taking on the longest reigning NXT U.K. champ ever. Such a match is noteworthy, no matter who the combatants may be. When those recordholders are Jacob Fatu and Gunther, then buckle your seatbelts. While we at *PWI* enjoy a varied taste in wrestling styles, sometimes you've got to just sit back and squirm at the magnificent violence on display when wrestlers like this collide. With chops, slaps, slams, and suplexes aplenty, be certain that neither man is walking out of this one without a red chest and a black eye. And may the best big-man frog splash win!

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

KEVIN OWENS VS. MJF

To be completely honest, this match serves simply as the cherry on top of the wonderful verbal jousting we would see in the build-up. With neither man shy about expressing his feelings, the interview segments should rank among some of the best we have ever heard. As for the actual match … While K.O. isn't averse to breaking a few rules, should the referee be looking elsewhere, there probably isn't a better rulebreaker in all of wrestling right now than MJF. And it's this element, more than anything else, that Owens needs to be wary of, should he hope to fend off "The Salt Of The Earth" long enough to hit a stunner and grab the three-count.

ROXANNE PEREZ VS. MERCEDES MONE

Competing at WrestleMania is a special moment for any wrestler. But, for those who have been a fan of the sport since childhood, it just means more to one day get to actually appear under those bright lights. That is why this match between two lifelong wrestling fans is such an emotional encounter. Fandom alone isn't what has brought these women to this point, though. And, at different stages of their respective careers, each still has plenty to prove. For Mone, it's that she is a bigger star than WWE ever thought she was. For Perez, it's that she can someday be everything her NXT predecessor has become. Perez will have scouted Mone for years, and she'll need all of that knowledge if she hopes to overtake "The CEO."

LUKE GALLOWS & KARL ANDERSON VS. FTR

Having held, between them, virtually every major tag team championship in North America, all FTR and the duo formerly known as "The Good Brothers" need to do now is settle the argument about which of them is better. With a deep respect for (and knowledge of) all the great teams that came before them, both tandems are likely to empty the tag team wrestling playbook in this prideful ring battle. So similar are both teams that even their finishing moves—FTR's Big Rig and G&A's Magic Killer—are quite alike in execution. It may just be a question of who can execute theirs first.

BIANCA BELAIR VS. JORDYNNE GRACE VS. JADE CARGILL VS. KAMILLE (FATAL FOUR-WAY MATCH)

Sure, four of the strongest, most athletic women in wrestling squaring off is a tantalizing prospect, but it's the sheer dominance that these women have displayed within their own promotions that really makes this a dream match. The championship runs that Belair, Grace, Cargill, and Kamille recorded throughout 2022 set the stage for a four-way that will give the winner ultimate bragging rights. It's fair to say that each woman will want to establish her strength advantage early. But, with each being so equal in that department, the eventual winner may have to look elsewhere in her repertoire to gain control of the action. Cue Belair's considerable speed and agility, which should be just enough to nab her the win.

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CODY RHODES VS. DUSTIN RHODES

Okay, so we know what we said in the intro, about how these matches mustn't have taken place before in a major promotion. But darn it, this one is just too good to pass up! In our defense, as well, when this brotherly battle took place at Double or Nothing in 2019, AEW was still a very young company. Plus, the Rhodes brethren themselves have said that they always wanted this contest to happen at WrestleMania. Voted our 2019 Match of the Year by *PWI* readers, any rematch will have a lot to live up to. But we are fairly confident the son of a plumber's sons can do it.

RONDA ROUSEY VS. DEONNA PURRAZZO

If history is any indicator, then expect Rousey to target a body part (likely an arm) early on and look to weaken it throughout the bout in the hopes of gaining an eventual submission. There's just one problem: The "Rowdy" one is in there with Purrazzo, a modern submission specialist herself. "The Virtuosa" is a more calculating competitor than the oft-hot-headed Rousey, and the New Jersey native would be best advised to use this to her advantage like others in WWE (and UFC) have done before. If she can control the pace, Purrazzo just might ensnare "The Baddest Woman On The Planet" and make her tap out.

SETH ROLLINS VS. WILL OSPREAY

A Twitter feud that began a few years ago—when each man defended the quality of wrestling in his respective home promotion—spills onto the "Grandest Stage Of Them All." And, regardless of the winner, it's wrestling fans everywhere who'll reap the benefits. An absolute show-stealing bout on a card of show-stealing bouts … if any match can do it, it's Rollins vs. Ospreay. While everyone watching knows just how good these two are between the ropes, the psychological gamesmanship played by both could prove just as much fun to watch. Given the elite-level physical conditioning on display, this match seems guaranteed to provide countless, razor-thin near-falls before one athlete eventually gets the duke.

LIV MORGAN & RUBY SOHO VS. ASUKA & KAIRI

Picture the set-up: Liv Morgan and Asuka agree to a tag team match, with one caveat being that they must each choose a partner from another promotion. In this ultimate Forbidden Door scenario, it's only natural that each woman would call in a trusted friend. And who more trusted, in this case, than AEW's Ruby Soho and Stardom's KAIRI? Having held tag team gold in WWE previously, the edge should go to Asuka & KAIRI, but don't discount the heart of Morgan & Soho. Since they went their separate ways, each woman has significantly upped her game in the ring. Should enough breaks go their way, this Riott Squad reunion may prove explosive.

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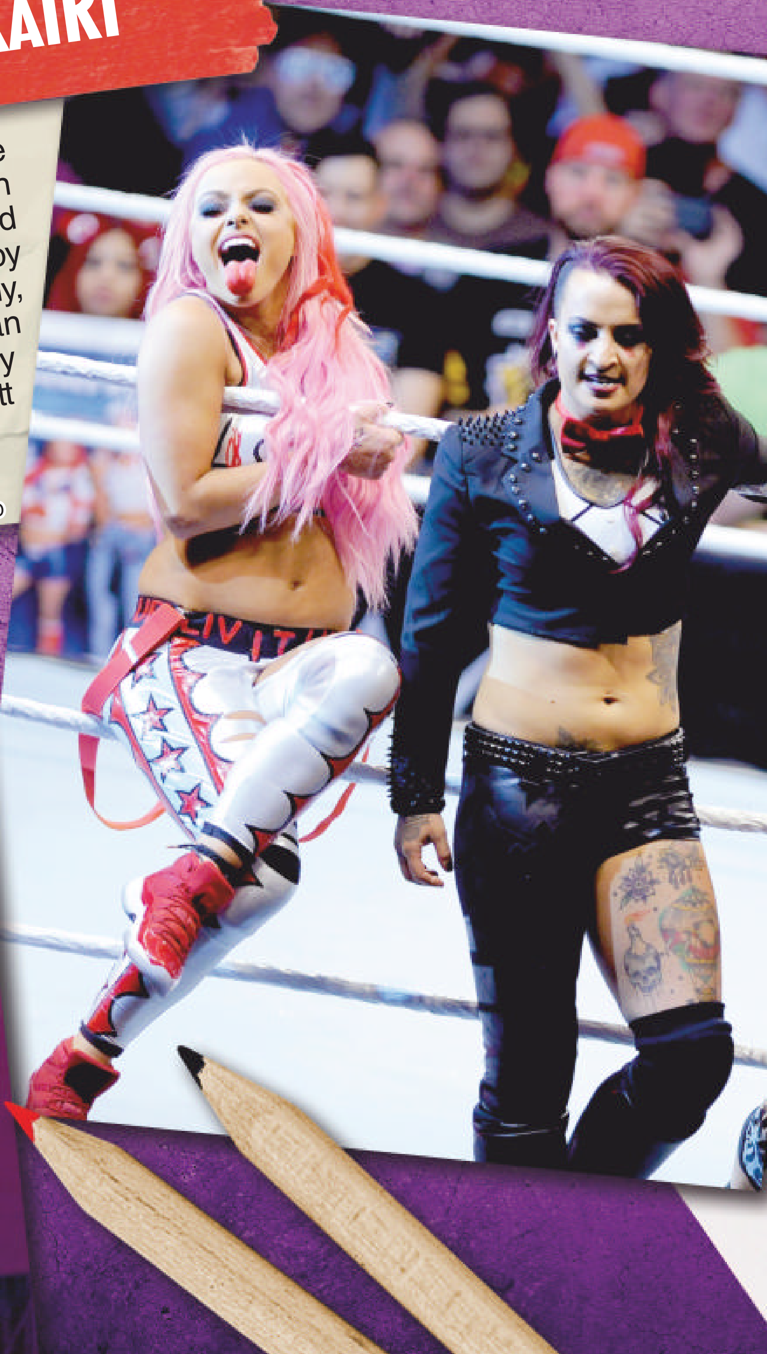
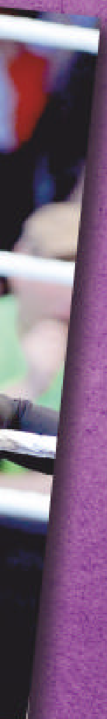


DAMAGE CTRL vs. DONNA DEL MONDO

In this six-woman tag, it's the triumvirate of Giulia, Thekla, and Maika stepping up to represent DDM against Bayley, Dakota Kai, and Iyo Sky. On the surface, there's a lot to like in the actual wrestling department of this match. But, dig a little deeper, and you'll find many parallels between the two groups in terms of personalities and career trajectories. Those similarities only make this bout more compelling. Quick tags and double-teams are the order of business in this row, with the wild card being just how much knowledge Sky (who once ruled Stardom) can supply her teammates about the sorts of calculated, yet high-risk offense they might expect.

REY MYSTERIO vs. REY FENIX

You know what might make this lucha libre showdown even more scintillating? That would be a *PWI* time-machine, which we'd use to bring 1997 Rey Mysterio here to face present-day Rey Fenix. As it stands, 2023 Mysterio is still fantastic. Considered generational talents by many, the similarities between Fenix and Mysterio are plentiful. Where the former might enjoy a speed advantage, the latter compensates with his experience. This contest could've happened at Lucha Underground, where both parties were involved in an Aztec Warfare match, but we've never seen a full-on singles showcase featuring the two. Don't be surprised if this one ends in a competitive time-limit draw … not that either Rey would be satisfied with such an outcome. Five more minutes?



CHRIS JERICHO vs. RHEA RIPLEY

If you thought a match against the likes of Drew McIntyre or Austin Theory was going to be enough for Chris Jericho on a show of this magnitude, then you don't know Chris Jericho. Often controversial and always evolving, Jericho uses his platform here to challenge Ripley and, in the process, kicks down a very *verboten* doorway (at least in modern WWE) by way of a competitive intergender match. With more than a nod to his classic feud with Chyna, Jericho's demeaning demeanor toward Ripley sees "The Nightmare" more than happy to try and make him "shut the hell up." Candidly, we like her chances!

EVEN YOUR FAVORITE WRESTLERS COLLECT TOYS ...

GO FIGURE!

TEXT BY NICK PERKINS

PHOTO BY MATTHEW GOLDBERG (@MBG1211)

MATT CARDONA AND ETHAN PAGE ARE JUST TWO OF THE STAR WRESTLERS TO PUBLICLY EMBRACE THEIR LIFELONG LOVE OF ACTION FIGURES. AND, THROUGH THEIR GENUINE ENTHUSIASM, EACH HAS TURNED THAT LOVE INTO A RESPECTABLE SIDE BUSINESS

THE BELL IS about to ring. You've been waiting all day, forcing your way through reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. But, while your body sits in class, your mind is miles away—planning out the latest WrestleMania card. Finally, the bell rings, and you're out of your chair quicker than a '97 Goldberg match. You get home, mumble something resembling a greeting to your parents, shut the bedroom door, and lock it behind you. Homework can wait. You've been daydreaming about this for the last 6 hours. "Stone Cold" Steve Austin is about to take on The Rock in a Tables, Ladders, and Chairs match.

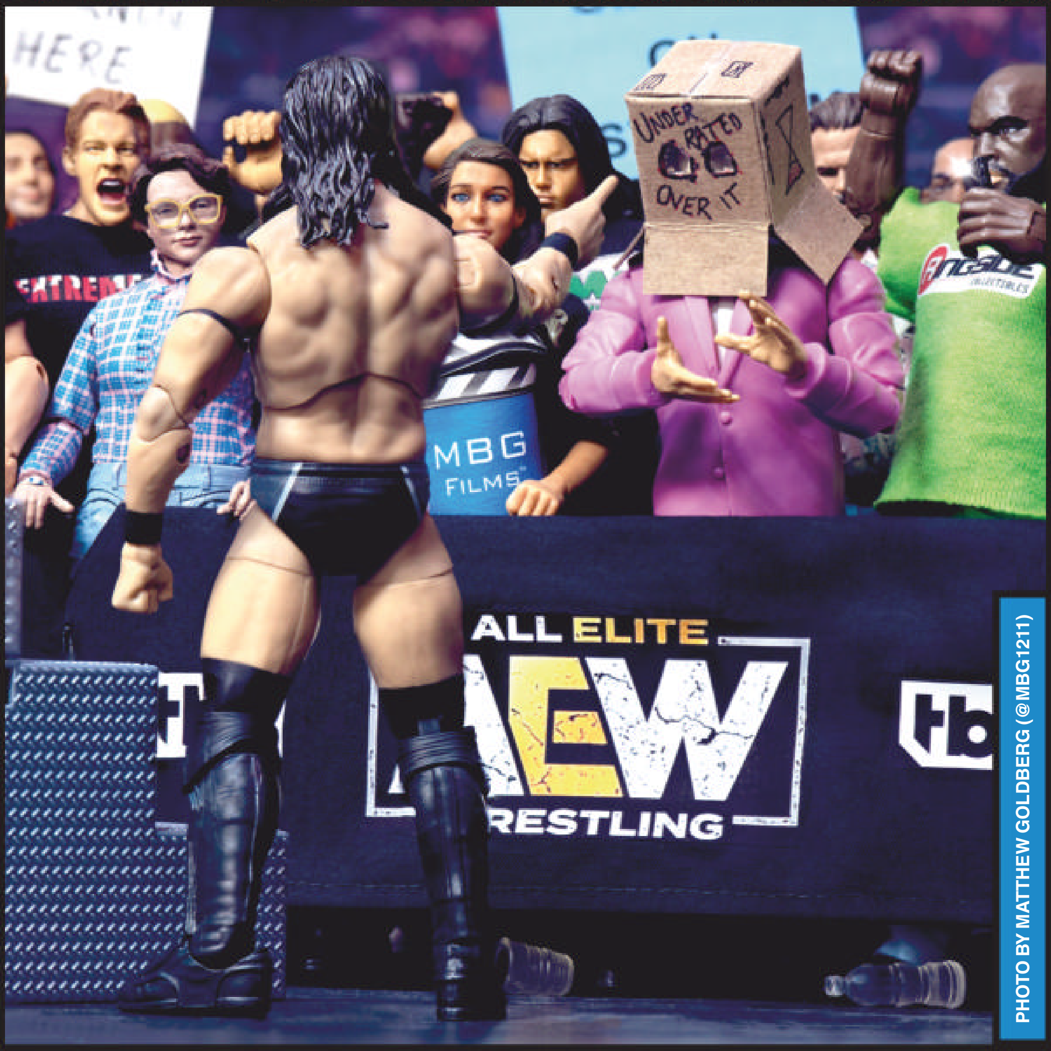


PHOTO BY MATTHEW GOLDBERG (@MBG1211)

Action figure PAC confronts a toyetic Kip Sabian, complete with custom-made cardboard box disguise. For an increasing number of wrestling fans who grew up as toy collectors, there's nothing like reconnecting with the hobby as an adult.

No, this particular match didn't ever happen on WWE television; it transpired solely in the throes of your own imagination. And what a match it was! Naturally, there were tables. There were ladders. There were chairs (oh my!). There was also a run-in from a Power Ranger. Batman was on commentary. You used your mom's hairspray and a lighter to set The Rock on fire (you had some issues as a child, but you've worked through them now and we're all proud of you).

Not just a collector, Matt Cardona (lower left) has now gotten into the action figure business himself. This series of "Major Bendies" figures also includes his pals (clockwise, from top left) "Smart" Mark Sterling, Brian Myers, and Swoggle.

PHOTO BY MATTHEW GOLDBERG (@MBG1211)

It was, without question, the best match that you've ever put on. When your "Stone Cold" action figure finally pinned The Rock and raised his plastic arms in victory, you breathed a sigh of relief. And you begin planning the next match.

For a certain generation of fans, one of the greatest aspects of professional wrestling was the wide variety of toys that went along with it. For some kids, it was an LJN Hulk Hogan or a stuffed Ultimate Warrior Wrestling Buddy. For others, it was JAKKS Pacific Bone Crunching Action "Stone Cold" Steve Austin. Others, still, played with a Mattel John Cena. Some of us had them all.

PHOTO BY TTD WRESTLING (COURTESY OF MATT CARDONA)

Longtime allies in the ring, Myers and Cardona enjoy an easy chemistry that carries over to their popular *Major Wrestling Figure Podcast*, where they talk about … well, you can probably guess!

Regardless of the brand, shape, or size, classic wrestling toys enriched the experiences of countless grappling enthusiasts. It offered them a chance to leave the arena or the television set and escape into their own imagination; a reality where they were the head booker and could write the stories the way they were supposed to be told … as only a child could. It was so close to the real thing, it was like being in the ring.

Eventually, those kids grew up, as children tend to do. They traded in their LJNs for car keys and their Wrestling Buddies for real-life girlfriends or boyfriends. These days, however, more and more people are embracing their inner child. They're still collecting toys, even playing with them. This goes for the wrestlers, themselves, as well.

Two of the most prolific toy collectors in professional wrestling are *PWI's* 2022 Indie Wrestler of the Year Matt Cardona and AEW star Ethan Page. Cardona was one of the first pro wrestlers to not only admit to, but actually embrace his love of wrestling action figures. He and best friend Brian Myers started a podcast focusing solely on these collectibles, and Cardona has even developed his own toy line, Major Bendies, which features independent wrestlers like EFFY, Nick Gage, and Danhausen in the classic "WWF Bend-Ems" style.

"I've been playing with action figures ever since I was a little kid," Cardona told *PWI*. "My earliest memories of wrestling involved the LJNs. I don't remember the first match I watched, I don't remember my first figure, but all of my childhood memories involve those figures. Then, eventually, it was the Wrestling Buddies, and the Hasbro figures, and the JAKKS. I just never grew out of it."

Neither did Ethan Page, who recently started a YouTube show showcasing the various "toy hunts" that he and his friends (such as Danhausen, Brody King, and The Bunny) undertake on the road. Page also has his own toy line, as he is part owner of the Asylum All-Stars, which produces figures of non-WWE legends, such as Buff Bagwell, Scott

Ethan Page is another successful wrestler and devoted collectible enthusiast. His *Toy Hunt* vlog drives viewers in droves to his popular YouTube channel.

THE CAT
BATMAN
BATMAN
AEW
MIGHTY MORPHIN POWER RANGERS THE MOVIE

COURTESY OF ETHAN PAGE

Norton, the Road Warriors, Earl Hebner, and more.

"I've always been into toys, because it's like a gateway for your imagination," Page said. "When I was a kid, I was obsessed with playing with toys and creating scenarios … and, with wrestling toys, booking my own storylines and shows. To me, toys are the best way to express your imagination. It's like a tool for creativity. And now, I'm obsessed with the nostalgia of collecting and re-collecting, or buying things that I couldn't have when I was a kid."

Page and Cardona aren't the only ones. More and more adults are purchasing the toys they couldn't have as children. CNBC reports that "Kidults" are responsible for one-fourth of all toy sales every year, spending more than $9-billion on toys.

There are probably many reasons for this—the biggest of which, of course, is the simple fact that it's *fun*. "That's the most important thing for me," Cardona said. "I don't buy these figures because they might have value one day. I mean, have I ever bought something to flip it? Sure, I have. Guilty as charged. But, for the most part, I buy everything, I open 'em, I let 'em breathe, I display them, and I cherish them. Will I ever sell them? Who knows? Maybe when I die, I'll leave them to my kids or something. But I don't buy things to sell them. I buy them because I love them. It's my drug. My addiction."

Ethan Page agrees. "I think everyone on earth has felt nostalgic for every decade and century," Page opined. "It's just, culturally, it wasn't really acceptable back in the day, and people weren't really open to it. And, when people would express attachment to anything from when they were a kid, they would get told that they're being childish, or they need to grow up. For us, it's a different society. People are a lot more open and communicative about what they're into, their passion and their needs. I think nostalgia is a need. There was a glowing part of our lives when we were kids. And, to re-collect this stuff … I'm kind of attached to that. It gives me that same feeling. So, I chase it, and I have no shame in admitting that that's what I'm addicted to. My drug of choice is nostalgia, and I'm gonna try and get it as much as possible." ■

PHOTO BY MATTHEW GOLDBERG (@MBG1211)

The wide variety of figures and accessories currently available means that fans and wrestlers alike can recreate their favorite in-ring moments, such as the classic steel cage match between brothers Bret and Owen Hart.

Though Matt Cardona has been known to sip a Pabst Blue Ribbon from time to time (as he and Brian Myers do here, in toy form), he says action figures are his most compelling vice.

Hustle
Loyalty Collect
PHOTO BY MATTHEW GOLDBERG (@MBG1211)

SPECIAL *PWI* COVERAGE

HIJO DEL VIKINGO'S FIRST U.S. TOUR

PHOTOS BY
EARL GARDNER
& MIKEY NOLAN

Photographers sure have their work cut out for them during Vikingo's matches, given how swiftly and unpredictably the world-renowned aerialist moves.

FOR THE LAST two years, American fans have clamored for the opportunity to see Mexico's most innovative luchador fly high on U.S. soil. However, due to reported issues around obtaining a visa—and, in fairness, a pretty demanding schedule in his home country—AAA Mega champion El Hijo Del Vikingo only recently wrestled his first Stateside match.

The Puebla native, who remains in demand across the Mexican independent circuit, made his U.S. debut in the main event of the December 3 AAA card, which took place in Tempe, Arizona. Between then and press time, he would go on to compete on multiple shows for Game Changer Wrestling, at DEFY Wrestling in Seattle, and in PWG's annual Battle of Los Angeles tournament on January 12.

There was just one catch: Vikingo's limited bookings were meant to be experienced live and in person. Promoters were not permitted to stream or broadcast the vaunted high-flyer's matches. A special dispensation was made for Pro Wrestling Guerrilla, which does not stream live but relies heavily on DVD sales, to include Vikingo's sole tournament outing on the eventual BOLA home video release.

For now, though, your best bet to see the AAA champ compete outside Mexico is to look for him on an event flyer near you … or, because you are holding a copy of this magazine, to enjoy some curated photos from two of his recent special appearances.

WRESTLING
GUERRILLA

Check out this wild somersault plancha from Hijo Del Vikingo onto AEW's Bandido. Even by Pro Wrestling Guerrilla standards, the AAA star gets some serious air!

Proud Jersey boy Joey Janela catches Vikingo off-guard at the Showboat Hotel's Carousel Room in Atlantic City. Janela was ultimately no match for his opponent's speedy resilience and explosive offense.

The son of Mexican journeyman King Vikingo shows off his most prized possession: the coveted AAA Mega championship belt, previously worn by the likes of Kenny Omega and Rey Fenix.

HIJO DEL VIKINGO U.S. TOUR

12.03.22 – Vikingo & Pentagon Jr. def. Daga & Flip Gordon (AAA, Tempe, AZ)

12.16.22 – Vikingo def. Blake Christian (GCW, Los Angeles, CA)

12.17.22 – Vikingo def. Nick Wayne (DEFY, Seattle, WA)

12.31.22 – Vikingo def. Joey Janela (GCW, Atlantic City, NJ)

01.07.23 – Bandido def. Black Taurus and Vikingo (PWG, Los Angeles, CA)

In the main event of PWG BOLA, night one, Hijo Del Vikingo prepares for triple-threat battle with frequent opponents Black Taurus and Bandido (who would score the fall over Taurus to advance in the eponymous tourney).

12 QUESTIONS with MANCE WARNER

COMPILED BY KEVIN McELVANEY

1 ON THE PRESHOW FOR RIC FLAIR'S LAST MATCH, YOU WON THE BUNKHOUSE BATTLE ROYAL. WHERE DOES THAT RANK ON YOUR LIST OF CAREER ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR?

MW: Dusty Rhodes, one of Mancer's favorites, best of all-time, is the only one that has ever won the Bunkhouse. So, hell yeah! That means a whole lot that ol' Mancer stepped in there and won it all.

2 IN MLW, YOU WERE THE ONE PERSON TO TERRIFY MJF CONSISTENTLY. DO YOU THINK HE'D DEFEND HIS AEW TITLE AGAINST YOU NOW?

MW: MJF is a got-damn chickens***. If he's a smart man, he wouldn't put the gold on the line–or any of them rings, either. I'd pawn one of them rings if I got ahold of it.

3 SPEAKING OF MAJOR LEAGUE WRESTLING ... YOU RECENTLY MADE YOUR RETURN THERE. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE CURRENT ROSTER?

MW: I think I could beat them all.

4 DESCRIBE YOUR PERFECT DAY OFF FROM WORK.

MW: Beers, grilling some grub, and being left the hell alone.

5 NAME ONE PAINFUL MATCH, BUMP, ETC., YOU'D NEVER WANT TO EXPERIENCE AGAIN.

MW: I've had my tongue stapled to a damn door, suplexed RSP (Rickey Shane Page) off the top of the Cage of Death in the ECW Arena, collapsed a lung, broken leg ... but it's all part of the fights, brother. Whatever you gotta do to hit the pay window.

6 YOU RECENTLY DEFENDED LATE-WCW AS GETTING A BAD RAP. WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE STUFF FROM THAT PERIOD?

MW: Booker T and "Big Poppa Pump's" (Scott Steiner) title runs. The cruiserweights ... *Nitro* and *Thunder* had some hidden gems. The last few PPVs were fun shows overall. Get some beers. Enjoy 'em!

7 WHAT IS YOUR GO-TO SNACK/BEVERAGE AFTER A BIG MATCH?

MW: Cold, cool, crisp, refreshing light beer.

8 WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER THE BEST-LOOKING TITLE BELT IN WRESTLING, PAST OR PRESENT?

MW: WCW World title, babyyyyy!

9 SOME INTERNET CRITICS HAD A PROBLEM WITH YOU FACING JON MOXLEY IN A WORLD TITLE ELIMINATOR ON YOUR AEW TV DEBUT. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO THOSE FOLKS?

MW: I don't really give a s*** what some crybabies had to say. I get paid to show up and fight. I hung with the world champ, I delivered on the promos, as I always do. Does that mean I would shake Moxley's hand? No, not at all. I'd fight that son of a b**** anytime.

10 WHICH CITY HAS THE BEST INDIE WRESTLING FANS, AND WHY?

MW: I can't name one place. Independent pro wrestling–from the big venues to the little towns–when ol' Mancer's out there, they're always loud and with it. That's my people.

11 WHO'S SOMEBODY YOU'VE NEVER WRESTLED, BUT YOU'D LIKE TO MIX IT UP WITH?

MW: Easy, baby. Give me Kevin Owens or Samoa Joe.

12 MATTHEW JUSTICE CALLED OUT *PWI* FOR NOT INCLUDING YOUR TEAM, SECOND GEAR CREW, ON OUR RECENT "TAG TEAM 100" LIST. WITH OUR APOLOGIES, PLEASE TAKE THIS SPACE TO TELL OUR READERS WHY WE MESSED UP.

MW: If I got to tell you why y'all messed up, then y'all some of the worst damn reporters in the world! But, in all seriousness, it ain't so much giving y'all s*** or giving you a hard time. Guys like me and Justice give everything we got every single time we get in the ring. The list is a list. But, when you spend year after year ... blood, sweat, and tears, missing things, beat up, and you still love what you do ... a little recognition can get us through some of the not-so-fun B.S. parts of the wrestling business. ■

MANCE WARNER

PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER

TV BREAKDOWN

BY HARRY BURKETT

CENA-NUFF? NOT QUITE!

John Cena returned to action, ensuring that he had wrestled at least one match every year of his two decades with WWE. He teamed with Kevin Owens against Universal champ Roman Reigns and Sami Zayn on the December 30 broadcast of *Friday Night Smackdown*. Despite having been booed by everyone older than 15 for the last decade, Cena received a thunderous ovation, perhaps from fans trying to make amends (or at least recognizing his legendary status).

True to his track record, "Big Match John" delivered big ratings for WWE. *Smackdown* attracted an average of 2,629,000 viewers for the program. It was *Smackdown's* highest non-holiday number since 2020.

WWE invested some cross-promotion and advertising into Cena's return. Not only was Cena's bout mentioned frequently on *Monday Night Raw*, but many spots ran during NFL games on Fox during the two weekends preceding his appearance. And there's reason to assume the initial advertising even helped the December 23 broadcast—one week before Cena's return—that featured an in-ring segment with The Bloodline and The Usos' undisputed tag team title defense against Hit Row.

The Cena example proves, in addition to carrying viewers from week to week, it's important to appeal to those infrequent viewers, too.

The 45-year-old Cena seemed inspired during his tag team match, as he and Owens delivered Five-Knuckle Shuffles to Reigns and Zayn, respectively, and Cena planted Reigns with an Attitude Adjustment while Owens hit Zayn with a stunner for the win.

With U.S. champion Austin Theory seemingly calling out Cena by using his "The Champ Is Here" line—and even Logan Paul musing about a showdown with the G.O.A.T.—it seems inevitable the

PHOTO BY SADIEL "SPEEDY" RUIZ/AEW

Ricky Starks gives MJF the verbal lashing he sorely deserves. In recent months, the "Absolute" athlete has proven he belongs in the main event picture at AEW.

FOCUS ON...
AEW DYNAMITE

DYNAMITE VIEWER NUMBERS [TBS]

December 7: 840,000
December 14: 950,000
December 21: 957,000
December 28: 876,000
January 4: 864,000
January 11: 967,000

Analysis: How can *Dynamite* reach one million viewers consistently? With CM Punk possibly gone forever, AEW President Tony Khan has renewed the company's focus on two of its "homegrown" stars, Ricky Starks and "Hangman" Adam Page. Starks delivered a breakout performance against new World champion MJF on the December 14 edition, then scored a solid win over Chris Jericho on January 4. Likewise, Page made a thunderous comeback, whipping Jon Moxley with a Buckshot Lariat on January 11. Intrigue among six terrific performers—MJF, Starks, Jericho, Page, Moxley, and perhaps Bryan Danielson—could be the answer. And the reward? To paraphrase Dr. Evil, "One *million* viewers."

16-time world champion will play an important role at WrestleMania 39.

NEW YEAR'S EVIL: GOOD FOR NXT

Thumbs up to NXT and AEW for a relatively new concept in televised wrestling: the "special edition" show. AEW took the concept to a new level with specials such as "New Year's Smash," which encompassed episodes of both *Dynamite* and *Rampage* last year, and a "Winter Is Coming" edition of *Dynamite* that aired in December 2022. Particularly for brands with bimonthly PLEs (NXT) or quarterly PPVs (AEW), these special editions are events to build toward. If done correctly, this can result in considerably more viewers.

Consider the "New Year's Evil" edition of *NXT*, which aired January 10. *NXT* began building to NYE before its Deadline PLE concluded on Peacock, with Grayson Waller—the winner of that night's Iron Survivor Match—spoiling NXT champion Bron Breakker's hard-fought victory over Apollo Crews. The payoff? The NYE edition of *NXT* earned 700,000 viewers, an increase of 7.2 percent over the previous week.

Likewise, the "Winter Is Coming" edition of *Dynamite* on December 14, featuring World champion MJF vs. Ricky Starks, scored 950,000 viewers—an increase of 110,000 from the week before.

Tony Khan has said that AEW's specials were inspired by old TBS Clash of the Champions cards: significant TV events to boost interest in upcoming PPVs.

WAS THAT DYNAMITE OR SMACKDOWN?

"WWE Presents AEW Dynamite" was the snarky headline on the Sportskeeda news site, after AEW revealed new sets for both *Dynamite* and *Rampage*, starting with *Dynamite's* Seattle outing on January 4. The primary set featured a large vertical LED screen flanked by an LED panel on both sides. Two entrance doors replaced the tunnels previously used at AEW televised events.

Considering the promotion's good live-attendance numbers, it made sense to further illuminate the audience. On-screen graphics were highlighted in red and blue.

AEW President Tony Khan, in the lead-up to the New Year, called the new set "beautiful." While it's true that AEW blended in some WWE elements, it did appear to be an upgrade in terms of production values. Even Sportskeeda would agree with that.

IS THAT MR. MARELLA?

"If it were a snake, it would have bit us," as the old saying goes. Still, one can't blame fans for doing a double-take when former WWE Intercontinental champ Santino Marella made a surprise appearance on IMPACT Wrestling's Hard to Kill pay-per-view, touting himself as the promotion's new director of authority (a tongue-in-cheek reference to TNA's overused authority figure from years ago), complete with "D.O.A." printed on his shirt.

Thank goodness there was no cobra!

Marella made his presence known upon seeing Moose hit Joe Hendry with a low blow to steal a victory, at which point he marched out and restarted the match.

And why shouldn't this surprise have been a surprise? Anthem, IMPACT's parent company, had filed a trademark for Anthony Carelli's old ring name—the rights to which WWE had not renewed—in late-December. Carelli had appeared for IMPACT in the past, including as a guest commentator earlier in the year. The Marella name, by the way, is a tribute to Gorilla Monsoon, whose real name was Robert Marella.

Look for Santino to offer a light touch, and maybe a slight ratings boost, to AXS-TV's *IMPACT Wrestling* in the coming months! □

SPOTLIGHT MATCH

ACTION ANDRETTI VS. CHRIS JERICHO

–*AEW DYNAMITE*, DECEMBER 14

Fans chanted "Let's Go Jobber," and the announcers characterized Chris Jericho's beatdown of young Action Andretti as a routine drubbing. Then, Andretti was suddenly thwarting Jericho's every move: kicking out of the Codebreaker, countering the Judas Effect with a near-fall, and delivering a slingshot splash to the legend on the arena floor. Andretti survived the Walls of Jericho and ended up landing a running shooting star press for the pinfall. Was this, as Excalibur proclaimed on commentary, the upset of the decade?

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

RIGHTEOUS WRAP UP

BY RIGHTEOUS REG

THE YEAR 2001 was a pivotal one for professional wrestling. Being a kid whose life had changed that day in 1997, when I first saw the ECW *Barely Legal* video tape, the company closing was a huge blow. The second biggest promotion in the world (WCW) was also bought out by WWE, and the wrestling landscape completely changed.

WWE was definitely on fire at this point—we know the history—but, with the foundation that ECW set, I was craving something more. I scoured the internet for the next best thing late at night on message boards and chat rooms. That became part of my daily life. And, late one night, I stumbled upon some highlight videos from Combat Zone Wrestling.

I remember being immediately mesmerized by a younger, smaller, very fast, and innovative wrestler, casually doing Phoenix splashes and standing shooting star presses … then being dropped on his head right after. My pro wrestling tastes changed forever when I discovered Amazing Red that night. Yet, it was another highlight video with Red, featuring two clean-shaven, very young-looking guys, that showed me the future of what tag team wrestling would become.

Hitting half-nelson Burning Hammers and sit out Tiger Driver '91s: These guys were wrestling like something I had never seen. Inspired by that night, I ordered my first videotape from Smart Mark Video, CZW's *Best Of The Best 1*, featuring all the guys I saw in those highlights. One game-changing match featured on the tape was a brother-vs.-brother showdown, which pitted Mark vs. Jay Briscoe in an amazing, spot-filled spectacle.

That show would change history and introduce one of the greatest tag teams of all-time, The Briscoe Brothers, who would go on to be Ring of Honor's greatest tag team ever.

Jay and Mark were with Ring of Honor from day one. Jay was actually featured against Amazing Red in the company's first match. Mark would probably have been featured, too, but he was legitimately too young to wrestle on the show.

Now, given the words I have here for the "Righteous Wrap Up," trying to break down all the great matches they had along the way would be impossible. Get the Honor Club streaming service. Watch them against, legit, anyone, and it's going to be at minimum a great match. Matches with The Young Bucks, American Wolves, Steen & Generico, Motor City Machine Guns, Homicide & Samoa Joe, AJ Styles & Red, FTR … I could go on and on.

Mostly, I want to talk about the legacy The Briscoe Brothers have in the current landscape of

PHOTO BY RICK HAMILTON

Jay & Mark Briscoe mingle with ROH fans and peers after their 12th World tag title win at Final Battle 2021. The innovative duo has left an indelible imprint on the sport of professional wrestling over the last 20+ years.

professional wrestling. I mean, name the greatest tag teams over the last 20 years: Bucks, New Day, Usos, FTR. They all either directly interacted with The Briscoes and upped their game or took elements from the Briscoes to up their game.

Jay and Mark defined a whole company in Ring of Honor. If you think ROH tag team wrestling, you immediately think The Briscoes. The legacy of ROH, until the end of time, will be that. Through the blood, sweat, and tears of those two brothers.

Jay Briscoe was a great pro wrestler. I said all of that to get to this. He spent part of the last 20 years as a singles wrestler, winning the ultimate prize in Ring of Honor, the ROH championship, and wrestling in some amazing contests against Jay Lethal and Adam Cole. He carried the flag for ROH like no one else, and his brother Mark was always along for the ride. Watch his title run on Honor Club—some amazing gems in there.

It's almost fitting that the second to last match in Jay Briscoe's career was the double-dog-collar match (with his brother) against FTR. I was lucky enough to be live in the building to see it, sitting with my *Grapsody* cohosts Phil Lindsey and Will Washington. A moment I will never forget; the finale of what many will consider the best trilogy of tag team matches ever.

The Briscoe Brothers are still the Ring Of Honor tag team champions. Some questions have been left unanswered. But, when you're talking the resurgence of tag team wrestling—and how it was revolutionized these last 20 years—you're going to talk about the contributions of Jay Briscoe.

With the sale of Ring of Honor to Tony Khan, and ROH being under the banner of AEW, The Briscoes got the opportunity to branch out in some other wrestling companies—winning tag team championships in promotions like IMPACT, Game Changer Wrestling, and House of Glory. They had a brief stint in the mid-2000s in Pro Wrestling NOAH, winning the GHC tag team championship, as well as a run with the IWGP tag team title.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/ROH

Jay Briscoe shakes the hand of new ROH World champion, Jay Lethal, following their classic bout at Best in the World 2015. This is a small glimpse of the real-life Jamin Pugh: a decent, giving man who respected his peers and valued family above all else.

Jay Briscoe has said in interviews that WWE was interested in The Briscoes many times over the years. But we all know that the Briscoes were never a WWE act; and that is why they took the path they did. I actually love that Jay's story, along with his brother's, was created outside of WWE. And it makes the moments even bigger and more important.

Whether it was in ROH, the indies, Japan, or any other stop along the way, you were going to remember the Briscoes' matches. And, hearing how passionate Jay was about the business, you understand everything it took for that passion to come through.

Jay Briscoe transitioned to the other side in early-2023, sending a shockwave through the wrestling world. These days, it's not as common to lose a wrestler in the prime of their career, but losing legendary wrestlers certainly is. Jay Briscoe was both—a legend in his prime—with a legacy of some of the greatest matches ever.

The Briscoes are in my top five tag teams of all-time. Future generations will watch Briscoe Brothers matches, and more sibling tag teams will be created because of it. But, hearing all the reflections on the life and career of Jamin Pugh, the real legacy he will leave will be the one of the heavily devoted family man.

A man who was on the earliest flights out, after his industry-changing matches in Ring of Honor, to get to home to his wife and kids. A man who spent a good part of his time in locker rooms talking about being a proud father. A man who went to war nightly with his blood brother, many times against him, in some of the most violent matches on American soil … but who was going to hug and kiss that brother immediately after.

A man who lived his life for his children and would do anything and everything to provide for them. Jay Briscoe was a phenomenal wrestler, but Jamin Pugh was an even better man. ☐

THE W COLUMN

BY KRISTEN ASHLY

WEST COAST WRESTLING doesn't get near as much credit as it should. It simply doesn't get coverage comparable to other territories.

That wasn't always true. Some of the best and most prolific talent in wrestling has come straight from the U.S. West Coast. Pacific Northwest Wrestling, the National Wrestling Alliance's Northwest territory, housed some of wrestling's greats, like Roddy Piper, Buddy Rose, and Stan Stasiak. In the late-'80s, the Northwest was hit with blow after blow, suffering from fines handed out by wrestling commissions and the aftershocks from the growth of the WWF. Similarly, several NWA outposts across California fell by the wayside by the early-'90s.

As is typical of wrestling, however, new blood is always waiting in the wings to cause a stir and reignite fan interest. In more recent times, the West Coast has been the home base for grapplers like the Young Bucks, Scorpio Sky, Swerve Strickland, Shotzi Blackheart, Bayley, and Candice LeRae—some of the most popular and decorated athletes in the business today. A large number of successful grapplers came through California's Pro Wrestling Guerrilla: a promotion formed in 2003 and currently owned by Excalibur and Super Dragon.

Though PWG has been a launching pad for incredible talent, female wrestlers are found few and far between on its cards. PWG currently has no women's title, and that reality echoes throughout the West Coast in other promotions. Though not distinctly a West Coast problem, women's wrestling in the region is often overshadowed for geographical reasons.

The area has long been a destination for wrestlers from the West Coast of Canada, Mexico, and even Japan. The wealth of worthy talent fighting for spots on a wrestling card has made things even more competitive for women of the scene. Big names such as LuFisto, Taya Valkyrie, Maki Itoh, and Miyu Yamashita—among many others—have gladly made the trek to the West Coast to showcase their star power.

Similar to other corners of the U.S. indie scene, many local female competitors have become "part-time" California wrestlers—chasing potential opportunities across the country due to the lack of spots on local cards.

Other larger West Coast promotions, like Prestige Wrestling and Championship Wrestling from Hollywood, lack women's titles. But they do feature big-name female

PHOTO BY JESSICA TORRES

Ruby Raze, a respected staple of the California indie scene, praises the resourcefulness of her wrestling peers.

PHOTO BY ROBERT COLIN

Delilah Doom clobbers "El Primohenio" Trebeca during her first defense of the Santino Bros. Wrestling Inner City championship. Though the West Coast doesn't have an abundance of women's titles to compete for, that hasn't stopped athletes like Doom from collecting gold wherever it can be found.

wrestlers more often, ensuring women are getting matches at the top of the card. In business terms, booking women with bigger names does draw a larger crowd to the show and secure more pay-per-view buys, so it's not uncommon to see bookers do just that. Why *not* book Maki Itoh if you know she'll produce more ticket sales?

At times, though, the hotshot booking approach seems to take chances away from the talented women who give so much to the local scene (including in smaller promotions), which in turn results in a lack of visibility for that same local talent.

Area indie promotions are responding to the lack of opportunities in positive ways. Future Stars of Wrestling recognized the need for a women's title and introduced the FSW Women's championship in August 2022. In late-2022, DEFY Wrestling added the DEFY Women's championship, currently held by Vertvixen and defended against California talent. In March 2023, West Coast Pro Wrestling will debut its inaugural women's title, set to be presented by Amy Dumas. Title matches, by their nature and intention, are bigger matches and will draw more fans to the product, which can only mean good things for the women of the PNW and American West Coast.

It's not as if the women of the western U.S. are unworthy of the shine. Take, for instance, the super-tough Ruby Raze, who has wrestled out West for 12-plus years. The California native, who also locks up as Reina Del Rey on the syndicated *WOW – Women of Wrestling* TV series, admits that geography can present some challenges.

"Women's wrestling on the West Coast is pretty unique because of how few ladies we have to cover such a vast area," said Raze. "I always say, in any given month, you have 10 or less active—meaning [they're] wrestling live shows, three-plus times a month—female wrestlers in Southern California. About 25 or less on the California coast itself. So, you're looking at 30, maybe 40 or so, active females that cover about 333,524 square miles."

This has left the limited number of women working in California in a situation quite common to indie wrestlers around the globe. "Because of the low number of female wrestlers, it'll [be] very likely that at some given point you will have to become an intergender wrestler or lose a spot. It's pretty inevitable out here," said Raze. "The dope thing is that, because of this, intergender wrestling is a part of our wrestling culture here and more widely accepted than in other areas of the country."

Indie "Bae" Heather Monroe, who is no stranger to intergender bouts, got her career started out West and saw something special from the get-go. She, too, can see the positive change coming.

"The thing I always thought made us unique is our grind," Monroe told *PWI*. "Being on the West Coast can be a bit of a black hole, so getting recognition is a lot harder. The women of the West Coast have to put themselves out there and take some big risks to be put in front of eyes in more saturated markets. And I've seen a lot of West Coast women do that … and do it well."

Area standouts like Sandra Moone, Delilah Doom, Zeda Zhang, Viva Van, and so many more, are working hard to get the attention of wrestling fans everywhere with their unique style, big personalities, and hard-earned skills.

"There have also been more eyes on the West Coast scene in general," said Monroe. "So, people are seeing these amazing girls a lot more now than they used to … which allows them to get more experience in different places and with different wrestlers."

Take it from those who've been there: Wrestling fans nationwide should be ready for the next wave of next-level West Coast talent.

"At this point in our wrestling cycle, pretty much all the female vets have kind of stepped off the independent circuit and onto bigger stages," adds Ruby Raze. "And, while it's good they still pop in from time to time, what this means is right now you have a sect of new female talent that are shaping what women's wrestling is becoming out here." ☐

On Heels

By Pollo Del Mar

ELIJAH BURKE IS such a goody two-shoes. Every time I turn around, "Da Pope" is talking about his Florida-based non-profit.

Long before I joined him on the National Wrestling Alliance roster—or became cohost of his popular *Pope's Point of View* podcast—I contacted the former NWA TV champ for an interview. Can you believe he had the unmitigated gall to ask me to donate to his Love-Alive Charity first?!

Yes, that's how dedicated he is to "positively impacting the lives of many people." For over a decade, "Da Pope" has run the Jacksonville non-profit (Love-Alive.Org), which provides food, clothing, and other necessities to area homeless and vulnerable populations.

To help support the cause, Elijah—most wouldn't *dare* call him that, but you'd better pronounce that "J" if you do—produces charity wrestling events twice a year. On January 14, he rolled out the star-studded Duuuval Brawl V. On the card were NWA talents like Women's World champion Kamille, Thom Latimer, and more. Jay Tha Gawd (JTG) defeated Allen Russell for the LAC title while Pope faced the other Russell Twin, Kameron, in a strap match. (I nearly lost my voice screaming for that child to whoop the former WWE and IMPACT star … but don't tell him!)

Naturally, that means "The Manager Of Champions" was there as well—flanked by the West Coast's most dominant duo, Money Power Re$pect. Northern California's Tag Team of the Year, Marco Mayur & "Fabuloso" Fabricio absolutely dominated "The Dude" Jamie Stanley and "Big Strong" MIMS.

Unfortunately, through chicanery, the NWA stars pulled out the win. That didn't stop us! I'm sure MIMS will remember his post-match encounter with MPR for quite some time.

Yes, it was lovely to be raising money for a great cause and such. But MPR and I were there specifically to watch the LAC tag title match. After Nu Nation toppled The End (Parrow & Odinson) to take the title, Marco, Fab, and I hit the ring to make sure everyone knew the winners had a date with destiny!

While I'm already plotting the future, it's important to reflect on the past. Do you know I never did get that interview with "Da Pope" back in the day? It's true!

Unfortunately, I now spend at least an hour each week with "Popie," recording our podcast. And I simply can't shut that do-gooder up!

Non-Binary Badass

Max The Impaler is absolutely terrifying—and equally impressive! From their groundbreaking work in the NWA to picking

Sure, this column is "On Heels," but there's no disputing the documented good deeds of "Da Pope" Elijah Burke. Given Burke's devotion to charity, it's a wonder that he and Pollo Del Mar get along so well!

PHOTO BY DANIEL MOORE/NWA

up titles in Japan, "The Non-Binary Nightmare" is on a tear. Personally, I love Max's utter disregard for who they destroy, decimating opposition of any gender.

Under the NWA banner, Max is led by the delightfully devious Father James Mitchell. For decades, "The Sinister Minister" has guided some of pro wrestling's most memorably monstrous miscreants, but Max—in my opinion—is his biggest "find" since leading an upstart Abyss on a swath of destruction through early TNA.

Last summer, at NWA 74, Max impaled the competition to win the Burke Invitational and earn a shot at the Women's World title. Though Mitchell's charge came up short, the match proved to be Kamille's second show-stealing outing of the weekend.

Taking the powerhouse to the limit also cemented "The Warlord Of The Wasteland" as a major player. They later made history again, competing in a multi-person battle for the vacated NWA TV title.

Overseas, Max has been just as threatening. A fall tour of Japan again saw them destroy everything—and everyone—in their path, utterly terrorizing The Land of the Rising Sun. In January 2023, Max returned with partner Heidi Howitzer. Known as The Wasteland War Party, they defeated Saki Akai & Yuki Arai for the Tokyo Joshi Pro-Wrestling Princess tag title.

It's hard to say whether Max even realizes their complete disregard for the rules. Are there such things in the Wasteland—or are those merely obstacles in the way of total devastation of anyone put before them?!

Regardless, I am sure that moral derelict Father James would assert "rules" are made to protect the weak. There's no question: Max the Impaler is anything but!

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

Max The Impaler tortures poor Yuki Arai en route to capturing the TJPW Princess tag team title.

Knight Time

It's been a long and winding road for LA Knight since he arrived in WWE.

Admittedly, I considered Knight's prospects for improvement bleak when the superstar emerged as the first opponent for a returning Bray Wyatt last fall. Boy, was I wrong!

Long considered one of the best "talkers" in the business today, a near-immediate top spot for the former Eli Drake seemed a foregone conclusion when he signed with WWE last year.

As Drake, he was an IMPACT standout, a multi-time champion with a well-received run with the World (nee Global) title. Surprisingly, the rebranded Knight arrived in NXT to relatively modest fanfare in February 2022.

There, he was met by Ted DiBiase, who bestowed Knight with the revived "Million-Dollar Championship" to fairly forgettable results. His challenges for the NXT North American title were short-lived and unmemorable.

Knight's jump to the main roster revived hope. Again repackaged—this time as Max Dupri—he became a managerial figure, shackled as the voice for a crew of male models. Collectively, they languished in the undercard.

It took fate, and perhaps a well-deserved gamble by Triple H, for Knight to finally get the spotlight he deserves.

When he came face-to-face with Bray Wyatt during a backstage interview, my heart sank. It seemed a quick squash of Knight (to establish the lauded Wyatt's comeback) was in the cards.

Instead, under Triple H's watchful eye, storytelling and character development moved front and center. The budding rivalry became an intriguing backdrop to Wyatt's psychological torment.

To some degree, Knight has played second-fiddle to the emergence of Wyatt's mysterious and menacing rivals, namely "Uncle Howdy." And yet, a rising tide lifts all boats! Knight's visibility and opportunities exploded.

These superstars finally do battle at the Royal Rumble (well after this was submitted, yet before it's circulated). The outcome pales in comparison to what Knight gained in the build. He's already proven he can stand toe-to-toe with Wyatt on the mic—something most simply cannot do.

Though it's taken a year, I couldn't be happier. The LA Knight we long expected has *finally* arrived. ■

ABOUT Face

By Candace Cordelia

THE "IT FACTOR." That unquantifiable magnetism that just is, and can never be taught, turns hard-working people into household names. But, while charismatic performers are plentiful in the wrestling industry, I've always thought that *true* babyfaces—the kind that enrapture hardcore wrestling fans and casual viewers alike—were harder to come by.

Enter Willow Nightingale, who, like the late actress (and one of Hollywood's most celebrated babyfaces) Mary Tyler Moore, turns the world on with a smile. It's difficult to think of Nightingale as anything but one of the most likable wrestlers around. I can't imagine a scenario where fans and the wrestling community at large couldn't or wouldn't root for the "Babe With The Power." In my humble opinion, it would be akin to disliking a casual encounter with puppies, bunnies, or babies.

I first heard about Willow in 2017, which was two years after the start of her professional wrestling career—and the same year I started my own foray into the industry as a backstage interviewer. My first glimpse of Willow was not a match, but a photo of her. She exuded "bubbly" and "spirited" immediately to me. And I made sure to put her over to the indie wrestling promotion I worked for at the time—without even knowing what "putting someone over" meant in the wrestling industry.

My efforts to get Willow booked were unsuccessful, but I was not surprised to see her ascent as a professional wrestler. What specifically transfixed me–and many others, based on my observations—was this self-professed "emo kid" who has remained positive and authentic throughout the years. Both of these traits, along with her unbridled ambition and in-ring talent, took her from becoming a three-time New York Wrestling Connection Starlet champion to receiving a "Willow Nightingale Is #AllElite" graphic. In between the sandwich of these significant career accomplishments, Willow continued to work hard, defeat opponents, and make time to check in with her fans … all with that recognizable smile of hers.

Nightingale has stated in the past that she's not one to put on airs—what you see is what you get. "It's just me being myself," she once told *PWI's* Editor-in-Chief, Kevin McElvaney, on the *Pro Wrestling INDIEstrated* podcast. Growing up with three siblings in the suburban hamlet of North Valley Stream, New York, Willow learned about the importance of community and giving back in an effort "to make other people's lives better."

She, like many Millennials, also absorbed music from emo and pop-punk bands, including My Chemical Romance and Fall

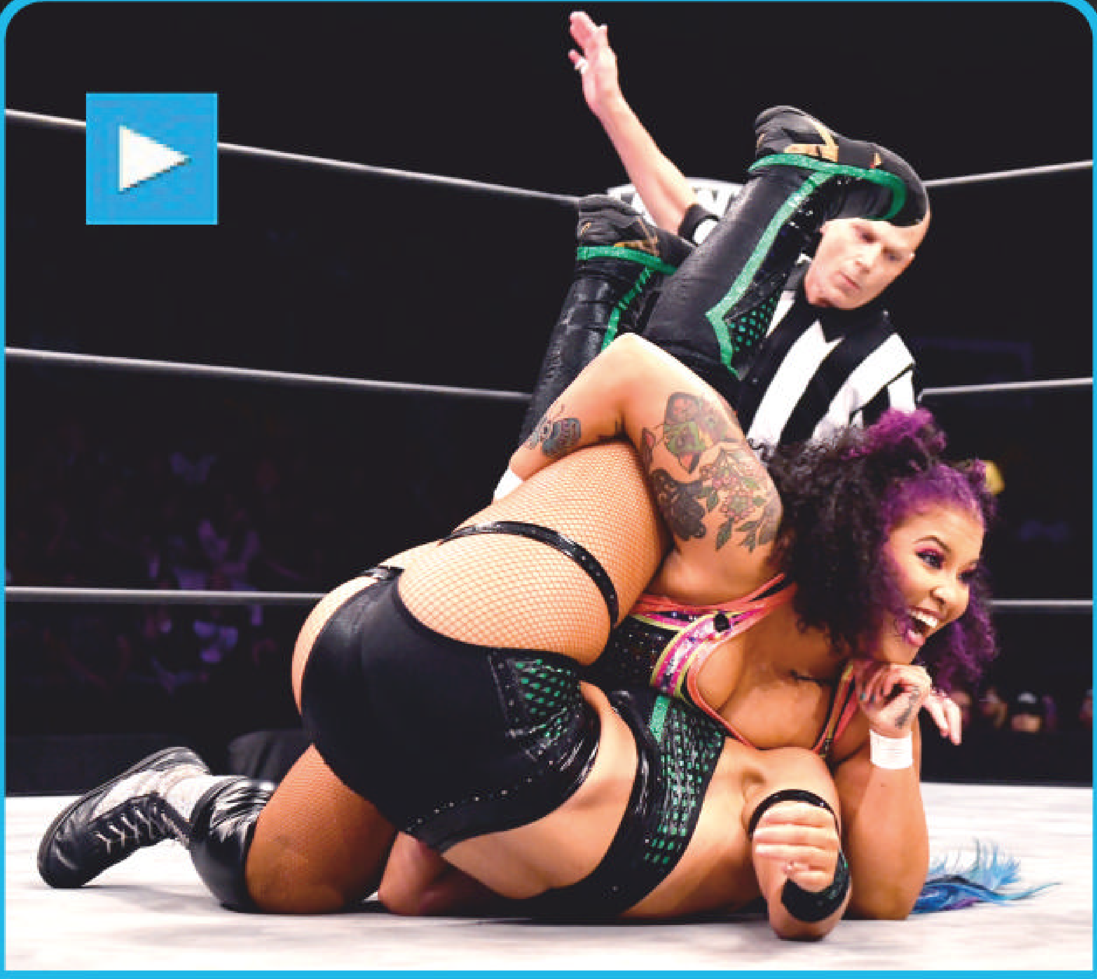


PHOTO BY LANE WALBERT/AEW

Consummate babyface Willow Nightingale looks absolutely *delighted* while scoring a two-count on Vertvixen during an *AEW Dark: Elevation* taping.

PHOTO BY CHRIS GRASSO

Bolstered by the fans in attendance, Nightingale attempts to fight out of a chinlock from Brooke Valentine at The Collective 2021. The Long Island native was booked by the show's curator, Allie Katch, who has expressed great admiration for her work.

Out Boy. "I was into a lot of mall emo … I would go to Warped Tour and things like that," she said during that same interview. Aside from the rally cries of "Thnks Fr Th Mmrs" and living in the wide-open spaces of Long Island suburbia, Nightingale also played video games, which she's credited as setting her on a path towards becoming a professional wrestler in the first place.

Willow's likable personality is infectious and has certainly helped wrestling enthusiasts' relentless campaigns for the star to get signed by All Elite Wrestling. When that moment finally occurred, social media exploded with waves of support, to which the affable wrestler made a characteristically humble response.

Funnily enough, some fans were surprised by Willow's visible shock after being told that she'd earned a spot on AEW's roster—ostensibly, during an in-ring segment with Tony Schiavone that aired on the October 21, 2022, edition of *Rampage*. "I honestly was not expecting for it to be as emotional as it was," she said on an episode of the *AEW Unrestricted* podcast. "It just kind of hit me in a way I really wasn't expecting when I was in the ring. I remember I went online after, and, of course, people on Twitter are like, 'I mean, she's All Elite obviously. She signed a contract. Why was she acting so surprised? She knows she's signed.'"

There's always a chance that wrestling fans will turn on a babyface. However, when it comes to somebody as genuine as Willow Nightingale, a response of this kind would feel more personal. According to Referee Aubrey Edwards, speaking on *AEW Unrestricted*, Willow's personable charm nearly caused an audible to be called during her unforgettable match against then-pronounced babyface Red Velvet on *AEW Rampage*. "I felt bad when we got to the back," Nightingale recalled. "'Cause I was like, 'I'm sorry they booed you!' Aww!"

Apologizing to her opponent for getting more cheers than her? Such a babyface!

As far as her craft is concerned, Willow Nightingale credits wrestling icons such as Victoria, Mickie James, and Mick Foley for being inspirations. And, in kind, some of her peers feel the same way about her. Indie grappling darling—and fellow *PWI* "Women's 150" ranked wrestler—Allie Katch has cited Nightingale as something of a role model. "I saw Willow and thought, *She's got it all. People are into her personality. She's got this great look and her wrestling's outstanding*," Katch told writer Cameron Hawkins in the October 2021 issue of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*.

Willow Nightingale is a babyface through and through. Based on personal experience, she's just as spirited and unmistakably joyful outside the ring as she is within it. And, while efforts to duplicate those genuine qualities may be attempted, they would most likely be in vain. Heroes who command the admiration and support of a Willow Nightingale—to say nothing of her look, wrestling attributes, optimism, and approachability—are in short supply.

Willow is an icon-in-the-making. She's both relatable and out of this world, which gives her all the makings of an elite babyface. ■

ARENA REPORTS

We encourage promoters and readers to e-mail results to:

PWIResults@yahoo.com

Please try to utilize the exact format you see in the "Arena Reports." Also, please distinguish between handicap matches and three- or four-way matches. And, when reporting the result of a handicap match, indicate the number of competitors and who was the last one eliminated. Finally, please note pinfall finishes. Following these guidelines will help us greatly and make it more likely that your report will be used.

SPOTLIGHT CARD OF THE MONTH

GEORGIA

ATLANTA—IMPACT Wrestling Hard to Kill 2023 at Center Stage: X division champion **Trey Miguel** defeated **Black Taurus** to retain … **KUSHIDA** beat **Angels**, **Delirious**, **Mike Bailey**, **Mike Jackson**, and **Yuya Uemura** in a six-person scramble … **Gisele Shaw**, **Savannah Evans**, & **Tasha Steelz** defeated **Jessicka**, **Rosemary**, & **Taya Valkyrie** … World champion **Josh Alexander** beat **Bully Ray** in a Full Metal Mayhem match to retain … World tag team champions **Alex Shelley** & **Chris Sabin** beat **Ace Austin** & **Chris Bey**, **Heath** & **Rhino**, and **Brian Myers** & **Matt Cardona** in a four-team elimination match to retain … Digital Media champion **Joe Hendry** defeated **Moose** to retain … **Masha Slamovich** defeated **Deonna Purrazzo**, **Killer Kelly**, and **Taylor Wilde** in a four-way bout … **Steve Maclin** defeated **Rich Swann** in a Falls Count Anywhere match … **Eddie Edwards** beat **Jonathan Gresham** … **Mickie James** defeated Knockouts World champion **Jordynne Grace** in a title-vs.-career match to win the title.
(01-13-23)

—Spotlight photos by Allie McPhetridge

CALIFORNIA

OAKLAND—I Know What You Did Last HOODSLAM at Crybaby Nightclub: **Joey Gonzo** & **Marcelo Montoya** defeated **Marco Mayur** & **Fabuloso Fabricio** … **Juice Lee** defeated **Rob Hands** by submission … **DARK Sheik** & **Vipress** defeated **M Y L O** & **Cereal Man** … **Drugz Bunny** beat **Richard Shhhnary** and **Anton Voorhees** in a three-way match … **Alpha Zo** & **Hip Hop Harry** defeated Intergalactic tag team champions **Matt Carlos** & **Joe DeSoul** to the title … Captain of the Champion Ship **Johnny Butabi** beat **El Chupacabra** and **James C** in a three-way match to retain … **PONG** defeated **Kenny K** to remain He Who Holds the Golden Gig.
(01-15-23)

–Jane Doe

A relieved Mickie James exhales after surviving her "Last Rodeo" story arc and becoming the new IMPACT Knockouts World champ.

HOLLYWOOD—Pandemonium Pro Wrestling at the Jaxx Theatre: **Wicked Wickett** beat **Serpentico** in a Gen Z championship match … **Allan Breeze** won the Moshpit Battle Royale by last eliminating **Ty Ray** … **Yuya Uemura** & **Richie Coy** beat **The DKC** & **Koto Hiro** … **Jordan Cruz** pinned **Jack Evans** … **Ishmael Vaughn** won The Hollywood Classic Gauntlet, last eliminating **Sandra Moone** … **Johnny Hollywood** beat **Kidd Bandit** to become the inaugural Pandemonium dotTV champion.
(12-04-22)

—Liz Hunter

OAKLAND—HOODSLAM Entertania XII at Crybaby Nightclub: **Anton Voorhees** pinned **Drugz Bunny** … **El Chupacabra** defeated **DARK Sheik** in a 30-minute Iron Challenge … **The Stoner Brothers** defeated **Barbieboi** & **M Y L O** … **James C** pinned **Batmanuel** … **Alpha Zo** pinned **Joe DeSoul** … Captain of the Champion Ship **Johnny Butabi** defeated **Juice Lee** and **Richard Shhhnary** in a three-way match to retain.
(12-04-22)

–Jane Doe

DELAWARE

HOUSTON—1st State Championship Wrestling & Capital Championship Wrestling at the Houston Volunteer Fire Company: **Killian McMurphy** defeated **Nelly** … **Chris Wylde** beat **Tiberius** … **Christina Marie** beat **Ultra Violette** by KO … **Solo** defeated **Trucker Josh** … **Bad Bad Banks** beat **Christopher Andino** … **Janai Kai** beat **Vita Von Starr** by DQ … **Jordan Blade** & **Brooke Valentine** beat CCW tag team champions **Lizzy** & **Payton Blair** to win the title … 1CW Workhorse Champion **Brian Morris** defeated **Jason Andrews** to retain … **AK Willis** beat 1CW Bulletproof champion **Ranch Hand Carlson** to win the title … 1CW Pro Wrestling champion **Ty Awesome** beat **Myles Millennium** by DQ to retain … CCW Global Fighting champion **Rebecca Scott** beat **Sara Leon** to retain … **The Tarr Dynasty** beat **The Dudleys 2.0** … **The Workhorses** won a tag team gauntlet … **B3CCA** beat **Brittney Blake**.
(01-14-23)

–David Valentin

GEORGIA

TYRONE—ACTION Wrestling at the Roger Spencer Community Center: **Jaden Newman** & **Noah Hossman** beat **Ashton Starr** & **Rico Gonzalez** … **Brogan Finlay** beat **O'Shay Edwards** by submission … **Alex Kane** and **Damyan Tangra** fought to a double countout … **Billie Starkz** pinned **Bobby Flaco** … **AC Mack** beat **Suge D** by DQ … **Culture Inc.** defeated **The Skulk** … **Adam Priest** beat ACTION champion **Anthony Henry** to win the title.
(01-20-23)

–Matt Griffin

ROYSTON—APW at The Royston Gym: Tag team champions **Revolution** & **Justin Sane** beat **Red Ninja** & **Eddy Morphy** ... **Jaden Vain** beat **James Boulevard** ... **Ballenger** defeated **Eli Smiles** and **Luka Daniels** in a triple-threat ... **Stryknyn** beat **Caleb Crocker** ... **Jacob Ashworth** pinned Southern States champion **Stevie Ray Frost** in a non-title match.
(01-20-23)

—Brian Edens

ILLINOIS

LITCHFIELD—Cottage Hills Wrestling Alliance at the Gudgel Ranch Saloon: **Big Daddy Dion** beat **Adrian Surge** and 1-Up champion **Chris Exodus** to win the title ... **Vicious Victoria** pinned **Manic Medic Margaret** ... **John Boi** defeated **Ken Collins** ... International champion **Cousin Waylon** beat **Sid Manson** to retain ... **Madi Monarch** pinned **L-Ride** ... **Alister Crow** won a 30-person King of the Hill Rumble, last eliminating **Jeremy Lightfoot.**
(01-21-23)

—Patrick Brandmeyer

INDIANA

SOUTH BEND—Revolution Championship Wrestling at the Goodson Event Center: **Alex Van Zant** beat **Logan Myers** ... **Daniel Stark** defeated **Dutchboi Platinum** and **Jorge Bravo** in a triple-threat ... **Spark of Madness** defeated tag team champions **Ju$t Bu$ine$$** by DQ ... **Brutus Dylan** beat **Douglas Stout** in a no-DQ match ... **Josh Crane** defeated **Mickey Midas** ... **Tony Thunder** beat **Backus ...** No Limits champion **Theo Storm** defeated **Let Er Rip** to retain ... RCW heavyweight champion **Kevin Storm** defeated **Blake Wright** to retain.
(01-14-23)

—Joe Sarro

Jordynne Grace nearly had James beat, with some observers noting the challenger appeared to have tapped while in Grace's submission hold.

SEYMOUR—Supreme Wrestling Ice Cold at Racin' Mason Pizza and Fun Zone: **Logan Fenrir** pinned **Kaden Brooks** ... **Charlie Key** pinned **Logan Myers** ... **Jordan James** pinned **Derrick Winter** ... Supreme heavyweight champion **Josh Lewis** pinned **Tanner Saturn** to retain ... **Kitty LaFleur** pinned **Rachael Armstrong** ... **The Russians** defeated **The Marksmen** ... **5 Count Frank** pinned **Eric Valkry** ... **Johnny Justice** & **Kash Jackson** defeated **The Disciples of LEGION**.
(01-08-23)

—Jason Cohen

IOWA

IOWA CITY—SCWPro Hawkamania XXVIII at Wildwood Smokehouse and Saloon: **Shain Boucher** & **Malik Champion** beat **James Thomas** & **Ript Studwell** ... **Dustan Moseley** defeated **Jared Thumb** ... **Krotch** defeated **Johnny Wisdom** ... Iowa champion **Shane Hollister** beat **Corn Boi** to retain ... **Aminah Belmont** & **John Bonhart** defeated **Maggie McKinney** & **Chuck Brewster** ... **Eric Eznite** beat **Brandon Becker** ... **Mason Beck** beat **Niko Kline** ... SCWPro champion **JT Energy** defeated **Connor Braxton** to retain.
(01-21-23)

–Alexander McCarthy

MICHIGAN

DETROIT—WWE Smackdown Live at Little Caesars Arena: **Liv Morgan** pinned **Xia Li** ... **Sheamus** & **Drew McIntyre** defeated **Erik** & **Ivar** ... **LA Knight** pinned **Greg Jones** ... **Hit Row** defeated **Los Lotharios** ... **Imperium** defeated **The Brawling Brutes** ... **Legado Del Fantasmo** defeated **Maximum Male Models** ... **Jey & Jimmy Uso** beat **Angelo Dawkins** & **Montez Ford.**
(01-20-23)

–Leonard Brand

ROMULUS—Live Pro Wrestling Showcase at the VFW Post 9568: **KJ Reynolds** pinned **Alex Van Zant** ... **TJ Meyer**

IMPACT World champion Josh Alexander secures a tapout victory over Bully Ray in their violent Full Metal Mayhem match (above). After the match, Jade Chung tends to her husband (right), having moments earlier helped him break free of Bully Ray's zip ties.

Jonathan Gresham attempts a standing moonsault onto opponent Eddie Edwards.

defeated **Marcus Porter** and **Trevor Straud** in a triple-threat ... **Chris Moore** pinned **Ren Jones** ... **Kevin Kalloway** & **Sean Tyler** defeated **Angel De Fay** & **Devon Ryker** ... **Darrion Ultra** pinned **James Fury** ... **Father Farquis** & **Mike Marvel** defeated **Jay Abrams** & **Andre Kobashi** ... **Brutus Atwell** pinned **Matt Valentino** ... **Ryan Matthias** pinned **Michael Elgin**.
(01-06-23)

—Leonard Brand

MISSOURI

ST. LOUIS—Glory Pro Wrestling at Delmar Hall: **Chris Hendrix** & **Mason St. Goods** defeated **Campbell Myers** & **SK Bishop** ... **Benjamin Trust** beat **Ezio Orlandi** ... **Rahim De La Suede** defeated **Ethan Price**, **Heather Reckless**, and **A.T.M.** in a four-corner match ... **Angelina Love** pinned **Blair Onyx** ... **The Deliverer Moses** defeated **Rohit Raju** ... **Curry Man** beat **Dan The Dad** ... **Karam** & **Xavier Walker** beat United Glory tag team champions **Davey Vega** & **Anakin Murphy** to win the title ... **Mike Outlaw** pinned **Kenny Alfonso** ... **Tootie Lynn** defeated **Kylie Rae** ... **Kody Lane** beat **WARHORSE** by DQ ... Crown Of Glory champion **Camaro Jackson** pinned **Jake Something** to retain.
(01-07-23)

—Patrick Brandmeyer

NEW JERSEY

WESTVILLE—ICW No Holds Barred at Skid Row Academy: **AKIRA** pinned **Eric Dillinger** ... **Tommy Vendetta** pinned **Crowbar** ... **Bobby Beverly** pinned **Jeff Cannonball** ... **Neil Diamond Cutter** pinned **Dr. Redacted** ... **Toshiyuki Sakuda** pinned **Eric Ryan** ... **Matt Tremont** pinned **Hoodfoot** ... ICW American Deathmatch champion **Brandon Kirk** pinned **John Wayne Murdoch** to retain.
(01-21-23)

—Leonard Brand

RIDGEFIELD PARK—Garden State Pro Wrestling at the Phil Sheridan Building: **Jey Mesias** beat **Patrick Fritzpatrick** ... **Eli Knight** & **Malik Bosede** beat **Leon** & **Max St. Giovanni** ... **Ruthless LaLa** beat **Kiah Dream** ... **Kevin Blackwood** defeated **Bobby Orlando** by submission ... **Charlie Tiger** & **Ellis Taylor** beat **Akira** & **Masha Slamovich** to advance in the Tag Team Tournament ... Openweight champion **Alan Angels** defeated **Alec Price** to retain ... **Bryan Keith** beat **Manders** ... **Edith Surreal** beat **Jordan Blade** ... **Marcus Mathers** defeated **Hunter Drake**, **Jordan Oliver**, and **Allie Katch** in a fatal four-way match ... **Mei Suruga** & **Baliyan Akki** beat **Yoya** & **Janai Kai** ... **Robert Martyr** defeated **Titus Alexander** in a number-one contender's match.
(01-15-23)

—David Valentin

BORDENTOWN—United Wrestling Coalition at the Elks Lodge: **The Gargantuan** pinned **Star Man** ... **Kurt Bale** & **The Hollywood Hooligan** defeated **Shawn Carlson** & **Kleetus** ... **Yankee TDM** pinned **Lawrence Spiral** ... **Warhead** & **Flash Carter** defeated **Iron Bull Argus** & **Bobby Banks** ... **Pete Corvus**, **Tommy Salami**, & **Grim** defeated **Mark Dangerfield**, **Samael Harris**, & **Bryan Haden** ... **Mr. Spectrum** pinned **Tiny Tim** ... **Andd Bivians** & **Joe Rules** defeated **Nelson Bauer** & **Dustin Wilson** ... **Tony Chini** pinned **Jay Evans**.
(01-07-23)

—Joseph Grana

PENNSYLVANIA

HAMBURG—American Xcellence Wrestling at Historic Hamburg Fieldhouse: **Bob Evans** & **Tim Hughes** defeated **Brett Waters** & **Sean Vandre** ... **Cabana Man Dan** defeated **Tony Evans** ... **Kekoa** beat **Leo Sparrow** ... **Jay Flyier** defeated **John Skyler** ... **Goldy** defeated **Andy Header** ... **Derek Neal** beat **Erron Wade** ... **Ed House** & **Laszlo Arpad** beat AXW tag team champions **AK Willis** & **Jason Andrews** to win the title ... **Matt Quay** defeated AXW champion **EN Bush** by DQ.
(01-07-23)

—Jason Coleman

PUERTO RICO

BAYAMON—World Wrestling Council Euphoria at Coliseo Ruben Rodriguez: **Mighty Ursus** beat **Super Gladiator** ... WWC TV champion **El Informante** defeated **Jay Velez** ... **Vanilla Vargas** beat **Yaide** ... **La Revolucion I & II** beat **La Seguridad** ... **Mike Nice** defeated Puerto Rico heavyweight champion **Nihan** to win the title ... **Eddie Colon** beat **Gilbert** ... WWC Universal champion **Intelecto 5 Estrellas** beat **Dirty Dango** to retain ... **Carlito** defeated **John Morrison** ... **Ray Gonzalez** beat **Xavant** in a hair-vs.-WWC Management match.
(01-08-23)

—Anthony Pineiro Delgado

TRUJILLO ALTO—IWA Puerto Rico's Christmas Hardcore Weekend at the Trujillo Alto Coliseum: **Stefano** & **Barbie Boy** defeated **Wizard** & **Ray Fonseca**

During the Hard to Kill countdown show, Black Taurus counters Trey Miguel's hurricanrana attempt outside the ring. Miguel would weather Taurus' attacks to retain his X division title.

Frankie Kazarian, who recently signed a long-term deal with IMPACT, congratulates the Motor City Machine Guns on a successful title defense.

… **Aiden Andre** won the Rumble for the IWA Cup, last eliminating **Edrax** … **Nathalya Perez** pinned **Krystal** … **Khriz Diaz**, **Nick Mercer**, & **Jay Blake** defeated **Pupe Jackson**, **Excellent Mantel**, & **Kiko Navarro** for the Undisputed tag team championship … IWA Intercontinental champion **Manu** defeated **Azazel**, **Niche**, and **Hijo Del Enigma** in a four-way bout to retain … **Savio Vega** defeated **Fernando Tonos** in a no-DQ match … **Manny Ferno** battled **Romeo The Cobra Venom** to a no-contest … **Romeo Quevedo** defeated **Mr. Big** and IWA Undisputed champion **John Hawking** to win the title.
(12-17-22)

—Luis Santiago

SOUTH CAROLINA

GREER—Pro Wrestling Turbo at The Spinning Jenny: **Raylen Albey** & **Funk** defeated **Alexevion** & **D'Angelo** … **WrestleRanger** pinned **Sandson** … Scramble champion **BK Westbrook** defeated **Ethan Case**, **Dean Richards**, **Spirit Machine TK**, and **Drew Hood** in a scramble match to retain … **Savannah Evans** pinned **Ella Envy** … **Josh Powers** pinned **Big Game James in a** Mad Dog Mayhem match … Pro Wrestling Turbo Interim heavyweight champion BK Westbrook pinned **Billy Brash** to retain.
(01-06-23)

—Brett Wolverton

TEXAS

FORT WORTH—Mat War Pro Brawl at the Hall at the Southside Preservation Center: **Chris Lyons** defeated **Helio Guerra** … **Morgan Mercy** defeated **Anarkid Ash** … **Brick Savage** beat **Aaron Eagle** … **Izzy James** defeated **Justin James** … **Shane Taylor** beat **Stonewall Remson** … **Aven Axl** defeated **Kristopher Haiden** … **The 300 lb Manimal** defeated **Brawler Morrison** … **Damo McCullough** beat **Brent McKenzie**.
(01-13-23)

—Joseph M.

INTERNATIONAL

CANADA

WINNIPEG—WPW PAIN ACTUALLY 2 at the West End Cultural Centre: WPW Women's champion **Jody Threat** beat **Blair Onyx** to retain … WPW champion **AJ Sanchez** defeated **Kody Lane** to retain … **Technical Difficulties** defeated **Red Hot Summer** … **Rylie Jackson** beat **WARHORSE** … **Free-Range Kara** defeated **Laynie Luck** … **James Roth** beat **Josh Holiday** and **Kevin O'Doyle** in a triple-threat … **Tommy Lee Curtis** defeated **Devon Monroe** … **Bobby Schink** beat **Chad Daniels**.
(12-09-22)

—Devin Bray

DENMARK

AALBORG–wXw x BODYSLAM! Wrestling at Skråen: **Bobby Gunns** defeated **Emeritus** … **Robert Dreissker** beat **Bam Bam Quaade** … **Baby Allison** defeated **Betty Rose** and **Aliss Ink** in a three-way bout … **Peter Olisander** defeated wXw Shotgun champion **Maggot** in a non-title match … **Pete Phoenix** defeated **Toby Zane**, **Erik Sabel**, **Jackpot**, **Robert Star**, **Hunyadi Tamas**, **Eli Castle**, and **Gabriel Faust** in an eight-person scramble … BODYSLAM! champion **Carlos Zamora** defeated **Ahura** to retain the title … BODYSLAM! tag team champions **RandersPagne** defeated **Arrows of Hungary** to retain the title.
(01-14-23)

—Kristian Buus Nielsen

ENGLAND

LONDON—PROGRESS Wrestling Chapter 147 at The Electric Ballroom: **CPF** defeated **Dan Moloney**, **Man Like Dereiss**, **Luke Jacobs**, and **Mad Kurt** … **Charles Crowley** beat **Maggot** … **Lizzy Evo** defeated **Alexxis Falcon** and **Nina Samuels** in a triple-threat … **Tate Mayfairs** beat **Simon Miller** … Women's champion **Lana Austin** defeated **Millie McKenzie**, **Rhio**, and **Skye Smitson** in a four-way match to retain … Tag team champions **Chuck Mambo** & **TK Cooper** defeated **Eddie Dennis** & **Mark Andrews** to retain.
(12-30-22)

—Jason McVeigh

IMPACT WRESTLING.COM

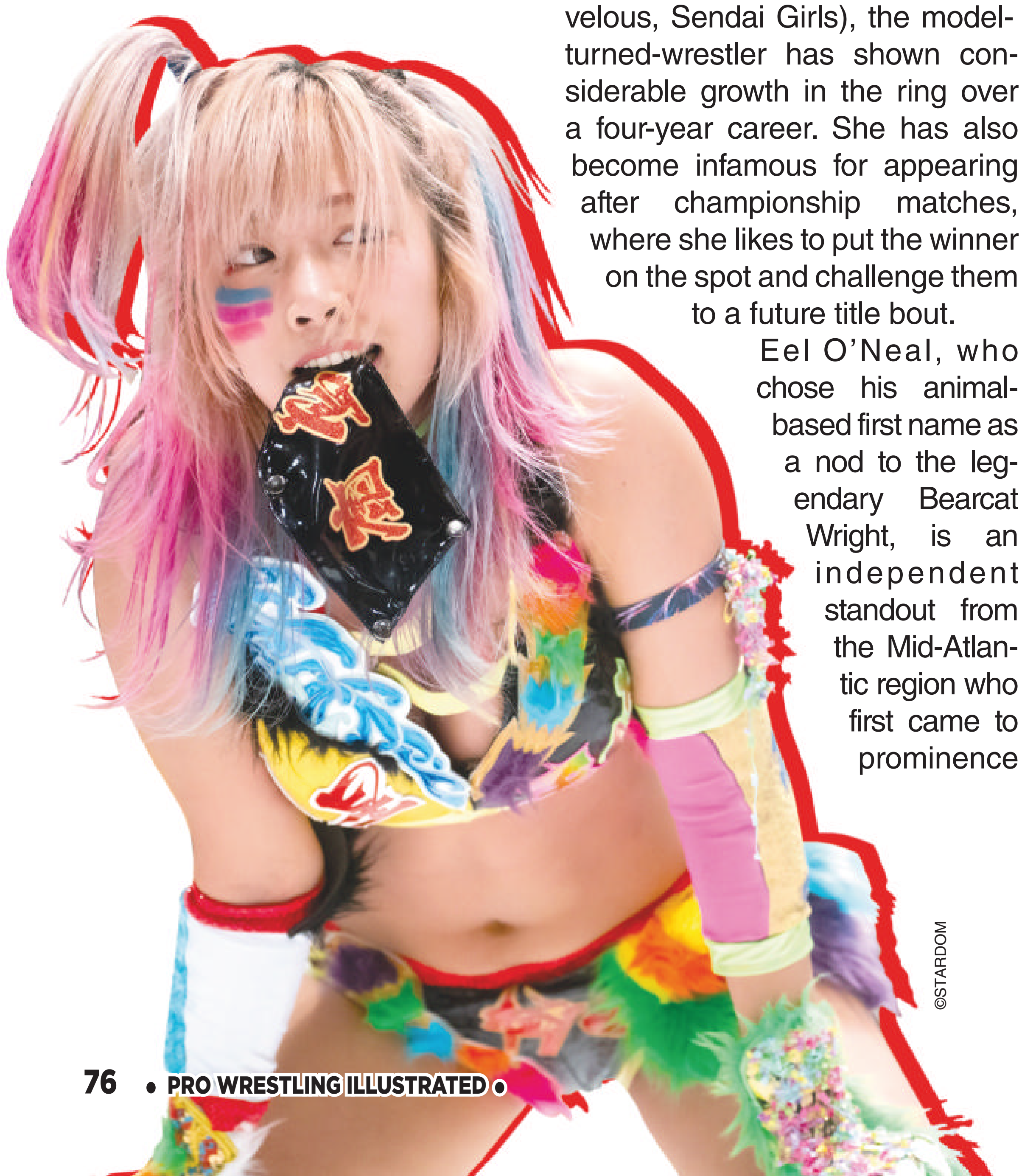
Masha Slamovich hits a somersault senton onto opponents Killer Kelly, Taylor Wilde, and Deonna Purrazzo. "The Russian Dynamite" would go on to win the four-way bout, becoming #1 contender to the Knockouts World title. Watch out, Mickie James! Between Slamovich and Jordynne Grace, you'll have your hands full in the near future.

GIVE US THE

BATTLE OF THE EELS: UNAGI SAYAKA VS. EEL O'NEAL

In a sport where bookers present dream matches with increased regularity, some bouts never could—and, perhaps, never should—actually happen. Instead, we'll play them out safely on the page!

SOMETIMES, PRO WRESTLING dream matches are born from a desire to showcase two wrestlers with complementary styles, or who have followed similar trajectories within their career. Other times, the reasons are far more tenuous. In this case, we simply want to see these two lock up because of their shared name.



©STARDOM

MEET THE PARTICIPANTS

"Unagi" (Japanese for "eel") is, for many joshi fans, synonymous with Ms. Sayaka: the former full-time member of the Stardom roster whose bright, colorful gear and matching demeanor epitomized Tam Nakano's Cosmic Angels faction. Now splitting her time between Stardom and freelance efforts across various Japanese promotions (Just Tap Out, Marvelous, Sendai Girls), the model-turned-wrestler has shown considerable growth in the ring over a four-year career. She has also become infamous for appearing after championship matches, where she likes to put the winner on the spot and challenge them to a future title bout.

Eel O'Neal, who chose his animal-based first name as a nod to the legendary Bearcat Wright, is an independent standout from the Mid-Atlantic region who first came to prominence as one-half of a popular tag team, Kings of the District, with Jordan Blade. Since first appearing in the pages of this magazine, O'Neal has also gotten more serious about singles competition, defeating MV Young for the Wrestlers' Lab title last August while competing for various other belts across the Northeast. He's known for his occasional silliness on social media, but make no mistake—this charter member of hated indie stable The Goons is a student of the game with legit grappling capabilities.

PHOTO BY JAYLEE MEDIA

Eel O'Neal manhandles Saul Esparza at Pro Wrestling VIBE in Washington D.C. If O'Neal ever met a certain Stardom wrestler in the ring, he'd likely have her bested in the strength department.

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

Apart from similar names, these two athletes share a willingness to work hard and irreverent senses of humor. Sayaka came into her own by taking the fight to various fellow Stardom competitors (many of whom trained at the same dojo). Although O'Neal boasts a couple

PENCIL!

more years experience than Sayaka, there is something to be said for the world-famous Stardom environment and that high level of competition therein.

For that matter, what O'Neal's career has in longevity, Sayaka's more than makes up for in total matches and ring time. But that's a bit of a double-edged sword, as O'Neal has access to far more tape to study ahead of their imaginary match.

Sayaka, who is usually quite familiar with her foes, may find herself unprepared for some of the Baltimore native's surprise takedowns and counter-maneuvers. He's also bigger and stronger than Cosmic Angels' prodigal daughter, who is typically larger than her opponents at all-women promotions.

Finally, neither wrestler is averse to getting inside the head of a rival—nor above taking strange detours during a match to throw the other wrestler off their game. It should be noted, though, that Sayaka's a master at taking all manner of punishment during her in-ring battles. Even among the resilient Stardom roster, she has been touted for her ability to withstand a great deal of attacks from wrestlers who have more experience and better win-loss records.

Unagi Sayaka plies her innovative offense against veteran wrestler SAKI, of the COLOR'S promotion. Sayaka has weathered attacks from—and held her own with—some of the globe's finest. We're afraid Mr. O'Neal won't stand a chance!

©STARDOM

SO, WHAT WILL HAPPEN?

Sure, it's been a while since the Osaka-born Unagi has worn Stardom singles gold—her last being the Future of Stardom title belt in summer 2021—but she's cut her teeth against some of the most skilled and fiercest grapplers on the planet. Even on his best day, that's a big disadvantage for Eel O'Neal—who, several years younger than Sayaka, is still working to prove himself on the competitive American indie circuit.

Sure, Sayaka likely won't be able to overpower O'Neal, and she may not be able to hang with him on the mat. But she's both agile and a capable striker. Her offensive arsenal includes a breathtaking leg drop, a solid big boot, and a variety of different slams that knock her opponents loopy. If we had to wager a guess, we think a momentarily cocky O'Neal would find himself on the end of any of those moves, allowing the Japanese "Eel" to pick up the pinfall.

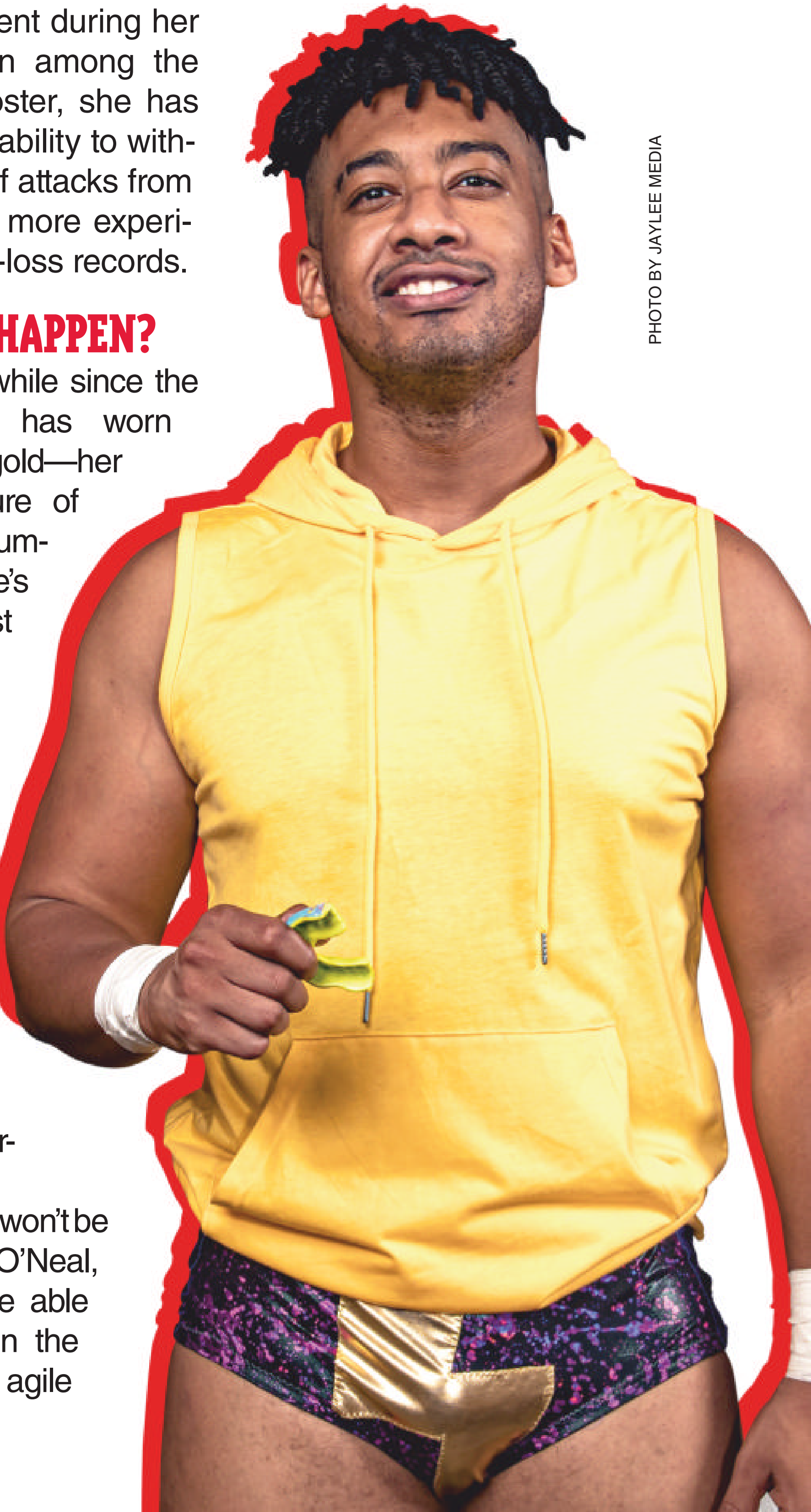


PHOTO BY JAYLEE MEDIA

THE WAY IT WAS

BY BRIAN R. SOLOMON

WHENEVER PEACOCK ADDS new classic wrestling content to its WWE section, you'd better believe that like many of you, I'm among the first in line to devour it. And Peacock didn't disappoint last December, with the addition of ten vintage episodes of *WWF Championship Wrestling* from the first four months of 1980. There are several things to recommend in the new offerings, including some early matches from a rookie managed by Fred Blassie known as "The Incredible" Hulk Hogan, some rare WWF appearances by Ox Baker, and a priceless match between Baron Mikel Scicluna and Rene Goulet that's far more entertaining than it should be.

But, by far, the main reason to check out these episodes is that they spotlight the explosive feud between Bruno Sammartino and his former protege Larry Zbyszko, which was the talk of wrestling in 1980 and featured what is, for my money, the greatest heel turn of all-time (sorry, all you Barbershop window fans). Watching those episodes all over again really reminded me of why that turn and subsequent angle were so memorable—and why it's all still so well-regarded 43 years later. It got me thinking about how differently this kind of thing was handled back in the day.

As a quick refresher, Bruno, by this point, was the legend emeritus of the WWF … kind of the role John Cena plays today. He could still go, but his world championship days were behind him, and his appearances were few and far between—special events that really meant something. Larry had started out in the early-'70s as a promising young babyface star, the 1974 *PWI* Rookie of the Year whom Sammartino had taken under his wing after he literally knocked on his front door as a fan trying to break into the business.

That was a shoot, as they say. But, after a few years as a solid mid-card fan favorite and tag team champion, Zbyszko needed a shot in the arm. And this angle would turn him into the most reviled man in the sport overnight.

The key was the subtlety with which everything was developed and presented. That's what really sold it to fans, and got them invested in a real, emotional way. For weeks, Zbyszko seemed distracted in his matches and promos, depressed or irritated by something. Finally, lead announcer Vince McMahon interviewed him on the January 12, 1980, episode of *Championship Wrestling*.

Zbyszko gave a heartfelt, grounded promo—the likes of which we rarely see today—frankly talking about his mental and emotional well-being, and how he sees himself as stuck in the shadow of Sammartino, the "Living Legend." He loves and respects Bruno, but feels the only way he can escape these feelings is by proving that he can defeat him.

Freshly betrayed by his trusted protege, a bloody Bruno Sammartino is tended to by officials. This all-time great heel turn is showcased on the *Championship Wrestling* episodes recently uploaded to the Peacock streaming service.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

PHOTO BY KENNETH GROH

CALL C
AT BAT
AUTO

The infamous Larry Zbyszko heel turn was a pivotal moment in the younger wrestler's career, leading to such marquee bouts as an August 1980 steel cage match with Sammartino at Shea Stadium. To this day, Zbyszko's blood feud with his mentor is cited by wrestling historians as one of the sport's most memorable rivalries.

It's all done in a way that still casts Zbyszko in a sympathetic light. He challenges his mentor to a friendly match. Sammartino, then settled into a color commentator role, politely declines, unwilling to risk their friendship … and perhaps knowing in his heart that he might humiliate the young wrestler. But the pressure mounts for a couple of episodes, as Vince continues to grill his broadcast partner about the potential match.

Finally, realizing Zbyszko won't take no for an answer, the former world champ reluctantly accepts. The match is set for the February 2 episode. This is an extremely rare television bout for Sammartino, whose appearances at that time were almost exclusively reserved for live events.

What follows is a master class on the art of the turn. Everything is logical; everything makes sense. There is no "swerve," nothing that comes out of nowhere (like you'd see today). Some may prefer the post-Attitude Era style of turn you don't see coming, but what Sammartino and Zbyszko do is believable, gripping, and, most importantly of all, feels real.

Starting as a clean, friendly match, you can see young Larry has something of a chip on his shoulder, as it quickly becomes clear that Bruno is just better than him. Yet Bruno refuses to totally embarrass him—it's a complex dance the two men are doing. With each effortless reversal of Bruno's, with each hold mercifully released on the less-experienced wrestler, Larry becomes more and more frustrated. He slams his hands on the mat, he pushes away a handshake. He's focused, and he's angry.

Finally, Sammartino accidentally tosses Zbyszko through the ropes and to the outside. Bruno is immediately apologetic, but Larry will have none of it. He's had all the patronizing he can stand. Instead, he grabs a wooden ringside chair and, to the absolute shock of everyone, begins pummeling Bruno with it—reducing him to a bloody mess, face down on the mat.

First, there is genuinely stunned silence. You can see the panic and concern on the faces of fans. Then, the boos and catcalls rain down, as Zbyszko waves his arms in disgust at the crowd and walks off. The "Living Legend," lying in a puddle of blood, is stretchered out. A somber Vince McMahon goes to commercial.

From then on, Larry Zbyszko was utterly despised, the object of true and palpable fan hatred. The ensuing feud between the two men set the WWF's business on fire in 1980, leading to multiple sellouts at Madison Square Garden and the steel cage main event of Showdown at Shea—the company's biggest stadium show up to that point. It was such a hot angle that Andre The Giant vs. Hulk Hogan that same night was only an undercard match.

More than anything, what made the Bruno/Larry feud stand out—and you see it when you watch those 1980 *Championship Wrestling* episodes—was the fact that it was the only real, discernible "storyline" being promoted at the time. There wasn't a lot of noise distracting fans; there weren't a dozen other wild and crazy angles happening on the same show. The attention of fans was focused like a laser beam on Zbyszko and his craven betrayal of wrestling's most beloved hero. In those days, white-hot angles were few and far between. But one of the effects of that approach was that when they happened, they really mattered.

And that's why we're still talking about Larry Zbyszko turning on Bruno Sammartino nearly half a century later. ☐

PWI OFFICIAL RATINGS

FOR PERIOD ENDED
JANUARY 20, 2023

HEAVYWEIGHT

1 **KAZUCHIKA OKADA**
236, Aichi, Japan
(-) IWGP World champion

2 **ROMAN REIGNS**
265, Pensacola, FL
(2) WWE Undisputed champion

3 **BRYAN DANIELSON**
210, Aberdeen, WA
(-) AEW #1 contender

4 **KAITO KIYOMIYA**
216, Saitama, Japan
(-) GHC heavyweight champion

5 **JOSH ALEXANDER**
240, Bolton, ON
(7) IMPACT World champion

6 **HIJO DEL VIKINGO**
207, Nuevo Leon, Mexico
(4) AAA Mega champion

7 **SHUN SKYWALKER**
198, Gifu, Japan
(-) Open the Dream Gate champion

8 **KENNY OMEGA**
218, Winnipeg, MB
(-) IWGP U.S./AEW trios champion

9 **GRAN GUERRERO**
209, Gomez Palacio, Mexico
(8) CMLL World champion

10 **CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI**
231, Lucerne, Switzerland
(5) ROH World champion

WOMEN

1 **CHARLOTTE FLAIR**
UNK, The Queen City
(-) Smackdown Women's champion

2 **BIANCA BELAIR**
165, Knoxville, TN
(1) Raw Women's champion

3 **JAMIE HAYTER**
143, Southampton, U.K.
(2) AEW Women's champion

4 **JADE CARGILL**
160, Vero Beach, FL
(6) AEW TBS champion

5 **ATHENA**
120, Dallas, TX
(-) ROH Women's champion

6 **MICKIE JAMES**
124, Richmond, VA
(-) IMPACT Knockouts champion

7 **GIULIA**
121, London, U.K.
(-) World of Stardom champion

8 **KAIRI**
114, Yamaguchi, Japan
(5) IWGP Women's champion

9 **ROXANNE PEREZ**
UNK, Laredo, TX
(7) NXT Women's champion

10 **MASHA SLAMOVICH**
(-) 136, Moscow, Russia
IMPACT Knockouts #1 contender

TAG TEAMS

1 **JEY & JIMMY USO**
Combined weight: 493 pounds
(1) WWE Unified tag team champions

2 **ANTHONY BOWENS & MAX CASTER**
Combined weight: 429 pounds
(2) AEW tag team champions

3 **ALEX SHELLEY & CHRIS SABIN**
Combined weight: 376 pounds
(5) IMPACT/NJPW STRONG tag champions

4 **HIROOKI GOTO & YOSHI-HASHI**
Combined weight: 452 pounds
(4) NJPW World Tag League winners

5 **DAKOTA KAI & IYO SKY**
Combined weight: 249 pounds
(6) WWE Women's tag team champions

6 **KENNY OMEGA & NICK & MATT JACKSON**
Combined weight: 628 pounds
(-) AEW World trios champions

7 **NANAE TAKAHASHI & YUU**
Combined weight: 352 pounds
(10) Goddesses of Stardom champions

8 **DOMINIC GARRINI & KEVIN KU**
Combined weight: UNK
(-) IWTV/ACTION/C4/DPW/SUP champions

9 **ANGEL DE ORO & NIEBLA ROJA**
Combined weight: 366 pounds
(-) CMLL tag team champions

10 **HIRAGI KURUMI, RISA SERA, & SUZU SUZUKI**
Combined weight: 411 pounds
(-) Artist of Stardom champions

WWE RAW

Champion:
ROMAN REIGNS
(C) 265, Pensacola, FL

1—**AUSTIN THEORY**
(1) 220, Atlanta, GA
2—**KEVIN OWENS**
(9) 266, Marieville, QC
3—**SOLO SIKOA**
(-) UNK, Las Vegas, NV
4—**BOBBY LASHLEY**
(3) 273, Colorado Springs, CO
5—**SETH ROLLINS**
(2) 217, Davenport, IA
6—**BARON CORBIN**
(5) 275, Kansas City, MO
7—**OMOS**
(4) 403, Lagos, Nigeria
8—**DEXTER LUMIS**
(10) 230, Recluse, WY
9—**BRONSON REED**
(-) 350, Black Forest, SA
10—**FINN BALOR**
(7) 190, Bray, Ireland

SMACKDOWN

Champion:
ROMAN REIGNS
(C) 265, Pensacola, FL

1—**GUNTHER**
(1) 297, Vienna, Austria
2—**RICOCHET**
(2) 188, Paducah, KY
3—**BRAUN STROWMAN**
(4) 340, Sherrills Ford, NC
4—**DREW MCINTYRE**
(5) 266, Ayr, Scotland
5—**SANTOS ESCOBAR**
(6) 198, Mexico City
6—**SHEAMUS**
(3) 250, Dublin, Ireland
7—**KARRION KROSS**
(8) 265, Las Vegas, NV
8—**SAMI ZAYN**
(9) 212, Montreal, QC
9—**MADCAP MOSS**
(-) 245, Minneapolis, MN
10—**SHINSUKE NAKAMURA**
(10) 229, Kyoto, Japan

AEW

Champion:
MJF
(C) 205, Plainview, NY

1—**BRYAN DANIELSON**
(6) 210, Aberdeen, WA
2—**DARBY ALLIN**
(-) 180, Seattle, WA
3—**RICKY STARKS**
(3) 194, New Orleans, LA
4—**ADAM PAGE**
(-) 215, Aaron's Creek, VA
5—**KENNY OMEGA**
(-) 218, Winnipeg, MB
6—**ORANGE CASSIDY**
(5) UNK, Wherever
7— **SAMOA JOE**
(1) 310, Huntington Beach, CA
8—**JUNGLE BOY**
(-) 190, Los Angeles, CA
9—**ACTION ANDRETTI**
(-) 185, Philadelphia, PA
10—**JON MOXLEY**
(2) 234, Cincinnati, OH

IMPACT

Champion:
JOSH ALEXANDER
(C) 240, Bolton, ON

1—**TREY MIGUEL**
(1) 172, Toledo, OH
2—**JOE HENDRY**
(2) 231, Edinburgh, U.K.
3—**BULLY RAY**
(7) 279, New York City
4—**BLACK TAURUS**
(6) 198, Torreon, Mexico
5—**STEVE MACLIN**
(4) 227, Rutherford, NJ
6—**EDDIE EDWARDS**
(10) 214, Boston, MA
7—**MOOSE**
(-) 300, Orlando, FL
8—**JONATHAN GRESHAM**
(-) 180, Atlanta, GA
9—**MIKE BAILEY**
(9) 174, Laval, QC
10—**RICH SWANN**
(8) 200, Baltimore, MD

NEW JAPAN

Champion:
KAZUCHIKA OKADA
(1) 236, Aichi, Japan

1—**KENNY OMEGA**
(-) 218, Winnipeg, MB
2—**HIROMU TAKAHASHI**
(-) 194, Tokyo, Japan
3—**JAY WHITE**
(C) 220, Auckland, NZ
4—**TAMA TONGA**
(-) Nuku'alofa, Tonga
5—**ZACK SABRE JR.**
(6) 211, Isle of Sheppey, U.K.
6—**SHINGO TAKAGI**
(7) 220, Yamanashi, Japan
7—**HIROSHI TANAHASHI**
(-) 222, Gifu, Japan
8—**WILL OSPREAY**
(2) 220, Essex, U.K.
9—**SHOTA UMINO**
(-) 227, Tokyo, Japan
10—**TETSUYA NAITO**
(9) 225, Tokyo, Japan

Ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. Unless submitted by promoters, ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Pat Laprade, Kris Zellner, Louie Dee, Harry Burkett, Jason McVeigh, Marek Indyka (Australian ratings), Paul Pratt, and STRIGGA (cagematch.net, purolove.com). The numbers in parenthesis indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue.

◆◆◆

PHOTO BY ALLIE McPHETRIDGE

MASHA SLAMOVICH

MOST POPULAR: 1—Sami Zayn; 2—Adam Page; 3—Mercedes Mone; 4—Mickie James; 5—Kazuchika Okada; 6—Jamie Hayter; 7—Hijo Del Vikingo; 8—Kenny Omega; 9—Giulia; 10—Roxanne Perez

MOST HATED: 1—MJF; 2—Dominik Mysterio; 3—Bully Ray; 4—Jay White; 5—Bayley; 6—Baron Corbin; 7—Chris Jericho; 8—Roman Reigns; 9—Jay Lethal; 10—Sam Adonis

CANADA (OVERALL): 1—Mitch Clarke; 2—Aiden Prince; 3—Channing Decker; 4—Josh Alexander; 5—Evan Rivers; 6—Matt Angel; 7—Nicole Matthews; 8—Stu Grayson; 9—Davey Boy Smith Jr.; 10—Marko Estrada

UNITED KINGDOM (OVERALL): 1—Spike Trivet; 2—Will Ospreay; 3—Charles Crowley; 4—Robbie X; 5—Leon Slater; 6—Rhio; 7—Big Damo; 8—Man Like Dereiss; 9—Tate Mayfairs; 10—Angel Hayze

ALL JAPAN: **CHAMPION**—Kento Miyahara; 1—Atsuki Aoyagi; 2—Minoru Tanaka; 3—Takuya Nomura; 4—Naruki Doi; 5—Hokuto Omori; 6—Kaz Hayashi; 7—Rising HAYATO; 8—Dan Tamura; 9—Suwama; 10—Jake Lee

DRAGONGATE: **CHAMPION**—Shun Skywalker; 1—Minorita; 2—Yuki Yoshioka; 3—Ben-K; 4—Kzy; 5—YAMATO; 6—H.Y.O.; 7—BIG BOSS Shimizu; 8—BxB Hulk; 9—Kota Minoura; 10—Dragon Dia

EWF (BRAZIL): **CHAMPION**—Bruno Astro; 1—Oba Khan; 2—Tommy Andrews; 3—KaOz; 4—Adrian James; 5—Raymon; 6—Peter Sigma; 7—Dano Cerebral; 8—Kim Star; 9—Andre O. Ogro; 10—Arthur Donnar

GAME CHANGER WRESTLING: **CHAMPION**—Nick Gage; 1—Tony Deppen; 2—Masha Slamovich; 3—Mike Bailey; 4—EFFY; 5—Joey Janela; 6—Jordan Oliver; 7—Blake Christian; 8—Maki Itoh; 9—Cole Radrick; 10—Kerry Morton

NATIONAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE: **CHAMPION**—Tyrus; 1—The Great Cyon; 2—Kamille; 3—Silas Mason; 4—Jordan Clearwater; 5—Trevor Murdoch; 6—Kerry Morton; 7—Odinson; 8—EC3; 9—Dak Draper; 10—Rhett Titus

NXT: **CHAMPION**—Bron Breakker; 1—Wes Lee; 2—Grayson Waller; 3—Axiom; 4—Apollo Crews; 5—Carmelo Hayes; 6—Joe Gacy; 7—JD McDonagh; 8—Dijak; 9—Tony D'Angelo; 10—Oro Mensah

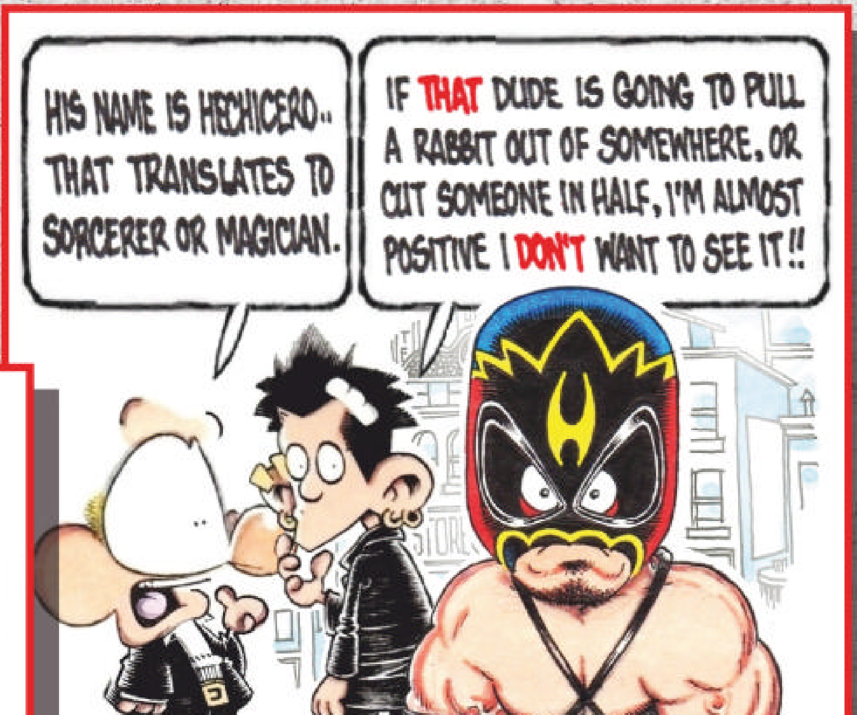
PRO WRESTLING NOAH: **CHAMPION**—Kaito Kiyomiya; 1—Kenoh; 2—AMAKUSA; 3—Hijo Del Dr. Wagner Jr.; 4—Timothy Thatcher; 5—Takashi Sugiura; 6—Keiji Muto; 7—Katsuhiko Nakajima; 8—Manabu Soya; 9—Satoshi Kojima; 10—Naomichi Marufuji

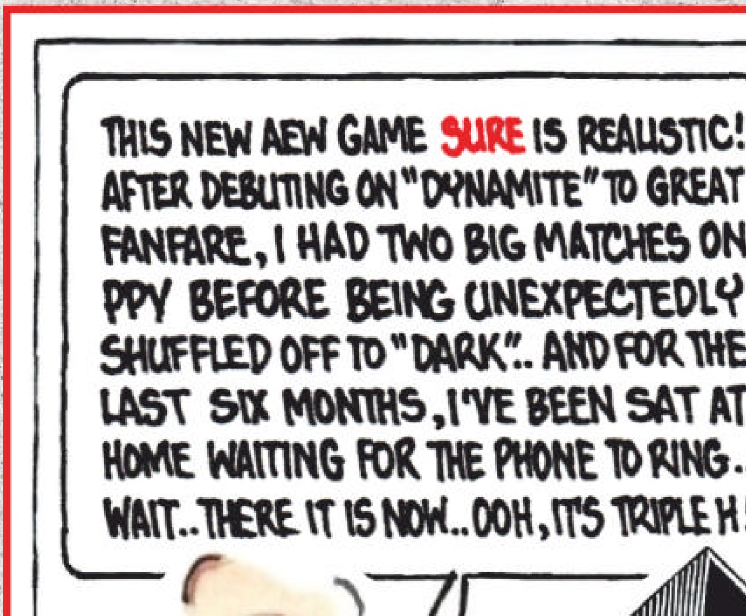
WELSH WRESTLING: **CHAMPION**—Ricky Bamba; 1—Riley Nova; 2—Nathan Angel; 3—Joseph Conners; 4—Scott Jones; 5—Brandon Lee; 6—Poison; 7—Brad Matthews; 8—Oli Blake; 9—Tommy Jones; 10—Kid Cymru

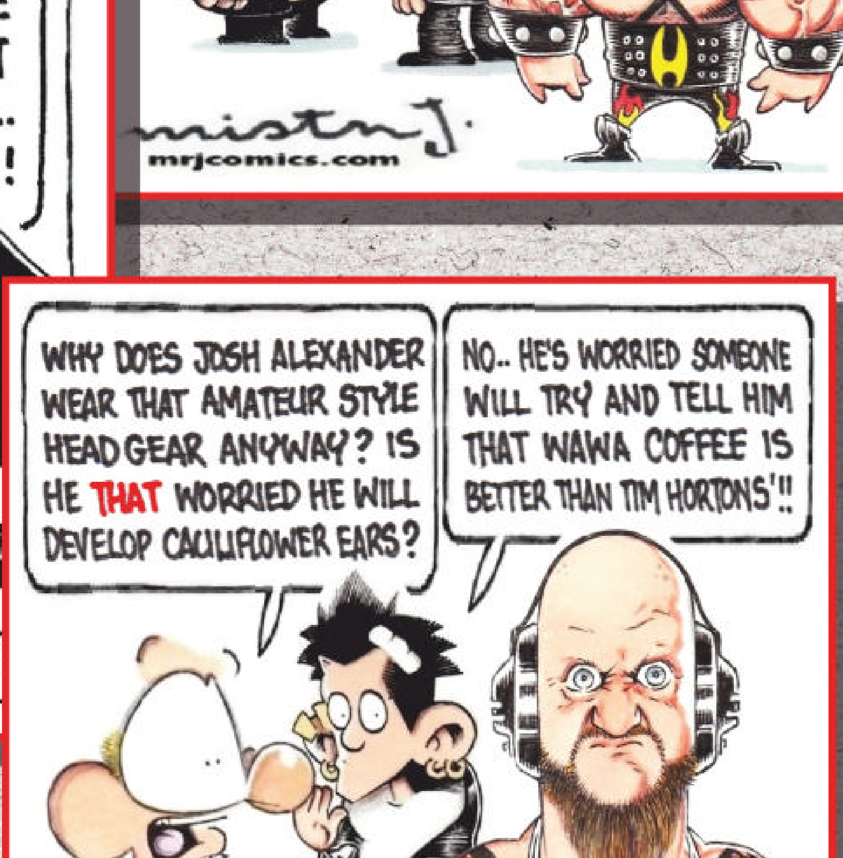
STARDOM	CMLL	AAA	MLW	INDEPENDENT
Champion: **GIULIA** *(3) 121, London, U.K.*	Champion: **GRAN GUERRERO** *(C) 209, Gomez Palacio, Mexico*	Champion: **HIJO DEL VIKINGO** *(C) 207, Nuevo Leon, Mexico*	Champion: **ALEX HAMMERSTONE** *(C) 251, Phoenix, AZ*	Champion: **MATT TREMONT** *(C) 250, Atlantic City, NJ*
1—**KAIRI** *(1) 114, Yamaguchi, Japan*	1—**EUFORIA** *(-) 214, Coahuila, Mexico*	1—**PAGANO** *(1) 244, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico*	1—**JACOB FATU** *(1) 280, Samoa*	1—**BRANDON KIRK** *(-) 200, Sayreville, NJ*
2—**SAYA KAMITANI** *(2) 128, Kanagawa, Japan*	2—**STUKA JR.** *(3) 185, Gomez Palacio, Mexico*	2—**PSYCHO CLOWN** *(2) 235, Mexico City*	2—**EJ NDUKA** *(2) 290, Dallas, TX*	2—**ALEC PRICE** *(6) 165, Boston, MA*
3—**SYURI** *(C) 128, Kanagawa, Japan*	3—**NIEBLA ROJA** *(-) 185, Gomez Palacio, Mexico*	3—**REY FENIX** *(6) 192, Coahuila, Mexico*	3—**DAVEY RICHARDS** *(3) 202, St. Louis, MO*	3—**MIKE BAILEY** *(-) 174, Laval, QC*
4—**AZM** *(8) 99, Tokyo, Japan*	4—**ANGEL DE ORO** *(-) 181, Gomez Palacio, Mexico*	4—**AREZ** *(9) 152, Mexico City*	4—**REAL 1** *(4) 200, Hackensack, NJ*	4—**TITUS ALEXANDER** *(2) UNK, Sacramento, CA*
5—**UTAMI HAYASHISHITA** *(5) 143, Kagoshima, Japan*	5—**MISTICO** *(4) 180, Mexico City*	5—**BLACK TAURUS** *(3) 198, Torreon, Mexico*	5—**ALEX KANE** *(5) 240, Atlanta, GA*	5—**BRYAN KEITH** *(8) 220, Greenspoint, TX*
6—**TAM NAKANO** *(4) 128, Kanagawa, Japan*	6—**TEMPLARIO** *(-) 218, Calpulalpan, Mexico*	6—**WILLIE MACK** *(8) 280, Los Angeles, CA*	6—**CALVIN TANKMAN** *(6) 355, Indianapolis, IN*	6—**MASHA SLAMOVICH** *(-) 136, Moscow, Russia*
7—**MAYU IWATANI** *(6) 117, Yamaguchi, Japan*	7—**DRAGON ROJO JR.** *(-) 187, Gomez Palacio, Mexico*	7—**PENTAGON JR.** *(4) 200, Mexico City*	7—**DAVEY BOY SMITH JR.** *(-) 265, Calgary, AB*	7—**ADAM PRIEST** *(-) UNK, Battleground, AL*
8—**AMI SOHREI** *(8) 154, Fukushima, Japan*	8—**VOLADOR JR.** *(9) 192, Coahuila, Mexico*	8—**EL CUATRERO** *(5) 207, Jalisco, Mexico*	8—**MANCE WARNER** *(8) 215, Bucksnort, TN*	8—**CALVIN TANKMAN** *(3) 355, Indianapolis, IN*
9—**THEKLA** *(-) 114, Vienna, Austria*	9—**ROCKY ROMERO** *(6) 176, Los Angeles, CA*	9—**BLUE DEMON JR.** *(10) 207, Mexico City*	9—**LIO RUSH** *(10) 160, Los Angeles*	9—**ANTHONY HENRY** *(7) 180, August, GA*
10—**NANAE TAKAHASHI** *(-) 143, Saitama, Japan*	10—**ATLANTIS JR.** *(4) 192, Mexico City*	10—**BANDIDO** *(7) 183, Torreon, Mexico*	10—**KILLER KROSS** *(7) 265, Las Vegas, NV*	10—**HOODFOOT** *(4) UNK, Indianapolis, IN*

DRAWING BLOOD

BY JASON CONLAN


HIS NAME IS HECHICERO.. THAT TRANSLATES TO SORCERER OR MAGICIAN.
IF THAT DUDE IS GOING TO PULL A RABBIT OUT OF SOMEWHERE, OR CUT SOMEONE IN HALF, I'M ALMOST POSITIVE I DON'T WANT TO SEE IT!!
mistr J.
mrjcomics.com


THIS NEW AEW GAME SURE IS REALISTIC! AFTER DEBUTING ON "DYNAMITE" TO GREAT FANFARE, I HAD TWO BIG MATCHES ON PPV BEFORE BEING UNEXPECTEDLY SHUFFLED OFF TO "DARK".. AND FOR THE LAST SIX MONTHS, I'VE BEEN SAT AT HOME WAITING FOR THE PHONE TO RING.. WAIT.. THERE IT IS NOW.. OOH, IT'S TRIPLE H!
J.


WHY DOES JOSH ALEXANDER WEAR THAT AMATEUR STYLE HEAD GEAR ANYWAY? IS HE THAT WORRIED HE WILL DEVELOP CAULIFLOWER EARS?
NO.. HE'S WORRIED SOMEONE WILL TRY AND TELL HIM THAT WAWA COFFEE IS BETTER THAN TIM HORTONS'!!
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